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# ***ARCHITECTS OF IMPURITY:***

A Study of the Political Imagination in  
Contemporary Fantastic Fiction

**BY**

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the limitations and capacities of genres of the fantastic in their ability to represent the “break” between agency and structure, specifically the transformation of the former into the latter on the scale of radical social and political change. The transformation of utopian impulse to utopian programme is traditionally understood to present a representational impossibility—a “break”—and to require a shift into a less rigorous fantastic or magical representational register. This thesis considers this apparent impossibility to be a product of an ontology of atomised individualism that informs texts from mainstream Hollywood blockbusters to more putatively radical works of literature. It argues that these representations of agency, conceptually limited to individual action, occlude the reality and possibility of communal political agency. This thesis takes contemporary neoliberalism’s transformation of social structures and subjectivities to be driving this specific limiting effect on the ability to imagine alternative patterns of social relations and on the scope and potential of the imagination as such. Beginning with the development of a new political theoretical approach to fantastic literature, this thesis seeks to identify, through a series of close readings, the mechanisms by which this ideological work is performed by sf and fantasy texts, and then seeks to identify alternative representational techniques and strategies that overcome these limitations, allowing the societal imagination to think communal political agency, and move beyond the imaginative confines of the neoliberal horizon. Culminating in the work of China Miéville, this thesis finds that the effort to represent the “break” requires techniques and tropes taken from various genres, in order to capture the *becoming*—the producing and being-produced—of the world, of social structures, of communities and of subjectivities. The resulting literature has the potential to recruit the reader into occupying a position of radical, critical subjectivity—one which not only understands the malleable, constructed nature of social reality, but understands their own part in its reproduction, and the potential they wield, along with others, to alter it.

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.

Utopia [...] serves a vital political function today which goes well beyond mere ideological expression or replication. The formal flaw—how to articulate the Utopian break in such a way that it is transformed into a practical-political transition—now becomes a rhetorical and political strength—in that it forces us precisely to concentrate on the break itself: a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealisable in its own right. This is very far from a liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived. (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 232-3)

[F]orget the notion of a fundamental break and look at the question as one of scale [...] Creative action, one might say, is at any level encompassed within a larger system of actions in which it becomes socially meaningful—that is in which it takes on social value. All creative action is to some degree revolutionary; but to be revolutionary to any significant degree, it must change that larger structure in which it is embedded. At which point one can no longer imagine that one is working on objects, but must recognise that one is also working on people. (Graeber, *Towards* 248-9)

The question of whether sf and fantasy are sharply distinguished is important for considerations of subjectivity, insofar as it relates to modern conceptions of the ‘impossible’. Consider Marx’s distinction of ‘the worst of architects’ from ‘the best of bees’: unlike for any bee, ‘[a]t the end of every labour process a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally’.

For Marx, human productive activity, with its capacity to act on the world and to change it—the very mechanism by which people make history, though not in the circumstances of their choosing—is *predicated on a consciousness of the not-real*. The fantastic is there at the most prosaic moment of production. (Miéville, “Editorial” 44)

## 2.

For Marx, human creative action is always preceded by an act of imagination—a conceptualising prior to a bringing-into-being, which distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees. But his vision of creative action stopped short at the most profound creativity of all: that of creating new patterns of social relations. Famously reticent to project descriptions of life in the promised utopia of full Communism, believing them to be necessarily tainted and limited by the concealed ideological assumptions of the bourgeois capitalist present from which they wrote, Marx and Engels understood radical social change in revolutionary terms, as a total break, beyond which the imagination could not penetrate.

Fredric Jameson writes from this tradition, founding the utopian power of sf in a meditation on this break, on the impossibility of representing the transition and result at all realistically (*Archaeologies*). Efforts to represent the process of far-reaching social change (the movement from utopian impulse to programme) inevitably, for Jameson, shift register from sf to fantasy or fairytale. This shift frees narrative from the material and historical resistances registered by sf’s “reality principle” (76), closely tied in Jameson’s approach to the genre’s “epistemological gravity”, “scientific pretensions” (57) and, reiterating Darko Suvin’s paradigmatic description of sf upon which Jameson leans (Suvin, *Metamorphoses*), its connection to realism. In fantasy or fairy tale, the freedom from registering material and historical constraints allows a liberation of agency, in which the world can be reshaped by magic—metonymic with the will and agency of the magician—alone. If sf registers effectively the material sedimentation

of historical creative action and its influence on present subjectivities and agency, then fantasy is conventionally understood as tending towards a representation and an exploration of agency unbridled. Thus the ending of the Strugatsky Brothers' novel *Roadside Picnic*, (the focus of chapter 3 of this thesis) which Jameson chooses as a prime example, shifts from sf to fairytale, ending on the protagonist *wishing* on a magic object for everything to be better, for everyone to be happy. According to Jameson's argument, the reality of such total reorganisation is impossible to represent, as is the impossibility of total happiness in a society of numerous crisscrossing individual desires, dreams and ambitions (76).

This divide drawn between sf and fantasy—and the representational capacities and limitations of both—mirrors the traditional lacuna between critical theories that privilege either agency or structure, but struggle to reconcile the two (Graeber, *Towards* 12). In the lacuna lies precisely the hinge between the two—the moment agency consolidates into structure, and the moment structure reflects back to shape agency. I want to challenge and explore the terms and conditions of this lacuna in this thesis: if fantasy is able to represent that creative potential of humanity to make its own history, then sf might be broadly understood as registering those circumstances in which it must be made, those that are not of our own choosing. As Michael Taussig has noted: “the vexing problem of individual versus social determination [...] can be translated into a confrontation of sorcery with sociology” (“Maleficium” 119). It is time for critics wishing to grapple with how radical social change can be enacted to pay more attention to fantasy, just as, in the work of China Miéville with which this thesis concludes, fantastic and Weird tropes and techniques infiltrate those of a more traditional sf, and suggest representational and conceptual means to begin to bridge Jameson's impossible break.

It will be a long fight to revalorise fantasy, however. Tellingly, both left-wing critics and the mainstream, normative culture, treat it in the main as a childish thing. While sf has enjoyed critical attention from a broadly Marxist perspective since at least Suvin's founding text



*Metamorphoses* (1979), fantasy has been made abject by the same critics, seen as escapism, nostalgia and reactionary wish-fulfilment. This was partly a political manoeuvre; in order to justify sf as worthy of serious attention, it was separated from and privileged against the surrounding fantastic genres. But recently the claims made for sf's difference and superiority—its supposed basis in rationality, its realism, and so on—have come under heavy attack, and demonstrably shown to be false (for example, in Miéville, "Cognition"). Worse than false, in fact, the hierarchical division made between sf and fantasy by Marxist academics reproduces distinctions drawn between notions of realistic/unrealistic or possible/impossible, the particular contours of which binaries are manifestly products of power, sustained by ideology, and closely tied to the maintenance of the status quo. This has long been the case; from a more traditional privileging of realism and compromise by a bourgeois capitalism to a neoliberal insistence on an instrumental realism that has infiltrated politics, economics and even discourses of morality today. To privilege sf and dismiss fantasy on similar grounds is to reinforce the status quo at the fundamental level of the imagination. Perhaps radical social change demands a shift into 'unrealistic' fantasy for its representation because of where these lines are drawn, rather than any inherent impossibility. In an attempt to move beyond the antinomies carved out by this binary position, this thesis investigates sf, fantasy and the Weird on equal terms, considering through a series of close readings how the generic tendencies of each can be deployed to think the hinge between agency and structure, and in turn think radical social change, but also what limitations they place on what we might call the societal imagination.

### **3.**

The neoliberal hegemony carves a line into the sand between 'possible' and 'impossible'; 'reality' and 'fantasy'; 'realism' and 'utopianism'—a line which consistently favours its own reproduction, and dismisses alternatives—in politics, economics and international relations: all of the disciplines

directly concerned with enacting an organisation of human society. Imagination, just as much as physical action, is permitted to exercise itself only within the bounds of rationality defined by this dominant ideology—creativity that isn’t channeled to making money, imagination that isn’t hitched to profit or self-advantage (whether personal, corporate or national) is either dangerous, meaningless or simply a thing for children. This authority over what is to be privileged as ‘realistic’ and what is not is “all about trying to draw the line of the ‘never-possible’ at a place which strips humans of any meaningful transformative agency” (Miéville, “Reveling” 365). The normative assumptions that inscribe and reinforce this line are the other side of the coin to particular, neoliberal sets of social relations. Since the neoliberal turn in 1979 (curiously coincidental with the publication of Suvin’s *Metamorphoses*, and its privileging of sf), neoliberal policies and governmentalities have vastly extended their reach. They have brought privatisation, quantitative evaluation, market logic and a rationality of efficiency and competition into public institutions previously guided by qualitative notions of social good, while individuals are increasingly persuaded to view themselves in the same terms, as rational selfish individuals who should aim to thrive by molding themselves to the needs of the market. This creeping symbiotic transformation of both social structures and subjectivities has in and of itself a specific limiting effect on the ability to imagine alternative patterns of social relations and, indeed, on the scope and potential of the imagination as such:

Under neoliberal restructuring, the potential of the imagination grows ever narrower, even as it becomes more pivotal. On the one hand, we are encouraged to see our imagination as a source of potential profit in a world of free-market opportunity [...] On the other hand, the imagination becomes synonymous with the private, a source of escapism and personal retreat from a world of work, debt, and worry. [...] What is fundamentally lacking at the “end of history” is any space for the societal imagination, the

imagination that might actually change anything substantial about the world” (Haiven 103-4)

Politics—in the sense of actual debate about genuinely different possibilities of social organisation—has, under neoliberalism, ceased to exist in any meaningful way in the corridors of power. Now the ethos is managerial: underpinned initially by the founding Thatcherite cry of ‘There Is No Alternative’, the neoliberal brand of capitalism sinks from debate and becomes ontology, enlisting a specific understanding of the world and of human nature in order to justify itself as the only realistic option. As Savage notes:

the class politics of earlier decades is almost nowhere to be seen at Westminster. In its place an ossified technocracy prevails, and the mainstream of political debate largely concerns how best to administer an increasingly unjust social order.

This “managerial antipolitics” (Savage), significantly enough, reproduces a particularly technocratic and instrumental approach that has its roots in the same techno-scientific paradigm as sf. Stanley Tambiah summarises the positions of Marcuse, Weber and Foucault amongst others, arguing:

the science-technology marriage has immediately affected [...] the *economy*, and it is in economic life that we witness the attempted vigorous application of ‘purposive rationality’ as instrumental action to change the world. Its focus and rationale is the production and distribution of wealth. At the next remove [...] the operations of the market place are applied to politics. Thus we have the following diffusion (some might say contamination) process: science invades the economy, the economy invades politics, and now politics is

alleged to inform us on morality, choice and the values to live by. (150, emphasis in original).

This antipolitics narrows political horizons and strangles popular agency to the point where the electorate have as much decision-making clout as bottom-rung employees in a large corporation. The lack of alternative political visions given the credence of being ‘realistic’ causes a stagnation that is nowhere more obvious than the bleak future visions of endless managed repetition and crisis, diagnosed as “the new chronic” by Eric Cadzyn (*The Already Dead*), and informing ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s lament of ‘No Future’ (*After the Future*).

The entwining of this technocratic attitude with the traditional science fictional imagination is significant. As Miéville notes, this imagination tends towards a particular utopian solution to political and social problems:

[the] layer of technocrats often envisaged in SF and its cultures as society’s best hope. This fond fantasy of a middlebrow-utopian bureaucracy [...] is a vaguely Fabian sociological articulation of the traditional SF hero, the *engineer*, deploying narrowly (and ideologically) conceived instrumental rationality, often in the form of applied science, to the bettering of the world.” (“Afterword” 239-40)

This tendency, informing the genre from at least HG Wells, and consolidated as particularly American during the pulp magazine period of sf in the 1920s and 30s, was and is an expression of an “uncomfortably patrician and anti-democratic class politics” (Miéville, “Afterword” 240). It is then no wonder that, as reality becomes science-fictional in terms of technological advancements, built environment, the adoption of the aesthetic for marketing depictions of utopian ‘capitalist futures’ and, unfortunately, governmentality, that fantasy becomes both

immensely popular (far outstripping sf sales [Jameson, *Archaeologies* 57]) and the genre best positioned to provide a critical distance.

#### 4.

I will argue in this thesis that fantasy provides a means of articulating agency, while narrative strategies of the Weird can be understood as destabilising normative reality and allowing the articulation of structural change. It is fantasy's depiction of unconstrained agency that readers and audiences find so attractive in the multi-media cross-platform industry fantasies of a *Harry Potter*, or a *Game of Thrones*. In these narratives individuals have the puissance or the social influence to have their desires and their will writ large in potent magic or conquering armies. This stands in stark contrast to the everyday alienation of the (for example) UK public from the power of decision-making processes. Anecdotally, my experiences in student action groups have confirmed to me that being a genuine part of the decision-making process—having that power, that responsibility, and also having ownership over the products of your labour, rather than being alienated from them—is, as many have testified, intoxicating, and provides a large part of the attraction. This is a widely credited phenomenon—noted with regards to the 2014 Scottish “Yes” independence movement, for example, in publications as politically diverse as *The Economist* (“UK RIP?” 13) and *The Jacobin* (Savage). However, these real-life examples of agency are, crucially, communal, as opposed to the fantasy examples cited in which power is grounded ultimately in the individual. In this way much commercial fantasy can be understood as providing empty calories for a hungry public—providing dreams of individual power and agency to the alienated and the disenfranchised, but simultaneously reproducing the individualised and atomised model of society upon which the neoliberal consensus rests, and which is precisely the conceptual paradigm that sustains the status quo in the first place, by robbing the public of a sense of communality and communal political agency. Part of the aim of this thesis is to explore

the conceptually limiting consequences of such representations of agency. If large social changes are to be made under an ontology of atomised individualism, as in most fantasy (and sf), they must be despotically implemented: the figure of the powerful wizard or witch is a totalitarian figure—an individual who bends the world to their will, as the protagonist of *Roadside Picnic* aims to do. This figuration of agency is one of *individual* agency that repeats, in its own fantastical way, the ontology of the neoliberal individual. It is no wonder that a generic shift into the fantastical is required to implement social change if the capitalist model of society underpins the narrative—capitalism inoculates itself from threat by occluding the very reality and possibility of communal political agency.

If we take Graeber's point in the opening quote seriously—that to cause truly significant social change, one must recognise that one is not only working on objects, but also on people—then to represent radical social change a narrative must be able to represent a dialectic between individual(s), society and material reality. Lacking a representation of communal agency, an sf or fantasy narrative is reduced to representing reality as a bifurcation in which 'society' stands apart from and as background to the activities of the individual characters—something which simply 'happens' and which they cannot influence in any way, unless through fantastical means. So the mode of contemporary fantasy, we might say, is a pale neoliberal reflection of a communal power that has been forgotten. When the utopian impulse to large-scale social transformation manifests within such a narrative form, it is no surprise that the narrative finds itself forced into the fairy-tale or fantasy mode, because to move from a world peopled by atomised individual agents to a world revolutionised, without an intermediate notion of communal agency, is to *need* magic, or miracle—the fantastic, the *unreal*—to bridge the gap.

## 5.

This thesis explores the situation posed above, identifying the ideological work performed by sf

and fantasy texts in reproducing the status quo, and limiting the ability to imagine, represent and narrate radical social alternatives. As it progresses, it develops an argument concerning how such limitations might be overcome, and Jameson's break represented. The argument threads together a number of related conceptual approaches, and shows through progressively more politically radical texts how the representation of communal agency, and thus the agency/structure hinge, is intimately tied to how discourses of purity and impurity are deployed. It concludes with the work of China Miéville and the radical potential of its representational strategies.

The first chapter sets up the theoretical foundations, which are built upon and enriched in subsequent chapters. It begins with an interrogation of Suvin's foundational paradigmatic theory of sf, which informs all that came after it in the Marxist tradition and beyond. The aim is to clear away the accumulated strata of arguments that have developed around the paradigm through misinterpretation, and discover what remains essential in Suvin's work. I incorporate some of the more valid recent criticisms, but seek to retain the crucial utopian and political kernel of Suvin's argument, specifically his notion of cognition, which I understand as a radically transgressive, historical and ethical insight that an sf or fantasy text might provide. Expanding the applicability of his theory to genres of the fantastic as a whole, I synthesise it with Mark Bould and Carl Freedman's tentative beginnings towards a theory of the fantastic as a fundamentally paranoid literature, seeing the fantastic as ideologically saturated and driven by a tendency to closure, rather than transgression as is so often argued. This is performed through recasting the two theories in terms of purity and impurity discourses, where elements of a text that are impure mark the location of what is truly transgressive in a text—that which refuses the ideological presuppositions, essentialisms and teleologies that otherwise inform the text.

The close readings begin with *Iron Man 3* (2013) in the second chapter. The film is considered as a cultural product that performs the ideological work of limiting political, societal imagination. It employs purity and impurity discourses to naturalise the neoliberal status quo and

demonise change while simultaneously providing a cathartic outlet for contemporary fears about neoliberalism and the contemporary socio-economic situation. Further, it cloaks a thoroughly nostalgic utopian vision of society in the trappings of the future, hobbling any real engagement with the present. This chapter also introduces a number of theoretical and conceptual tools that compliment the main paradigm established in the first chapter. The notion of ‘home’ is taken up for the first time, as a key concept in the shaping and the appeal of purity discourse. An evolution of the concept of home is traced through the following chapters, focussed on as a kind of ‘ground-zero’ of purity discourse, and contrasted with the Blochian notion of *Heimat* as a radical alternative mode of understanding ‘home’, identity and hope. In this chapter connections are also drawn between home, and concepts of desire, value and identity. Finally, the concept of defacement is introduced, outlining a particular narrative or representational device that serves the ideological purpose of grounding a contingent reality in an ontological constancy.

The third chapter concerns the Strugatsky brothers’ novel *Roadside Picnic*. The themes of the previous two chapters are developed, and a new concept—the *flaw*—is introduced, as a description of a narrative technique that is taken up by the texts studied in chapters four and five, which ultimately proves essential to circumventing the representational limitations of sf and the ideological constraints of a neoliberal ontology. The flaw introduces an unstable ontology into the world of the text, acting as a narrative device that opens up the possibilities for representing change and disruption of the status quo within a text. The chapter investigates why *Roadside Picnic* itself fails to completely fulfil its original radical promise however, focussing again on its conception of home, and its ultimately nostalgic mode of utopianism. It also introduces the concept of radical hope, in order to understand the text as ultimately depicting a struggle between two opposing value-systems, both with opposing forms of desire and social organisation.

The fourth chapter looks at the Kefahuchi Tract trilogy by M John Harrison. While Harrison deploys the figure of the flaw, and clearly aims to critique the neoliberal context from



which he is writing, with no apparent recourse to nostalgia or stable notions of home, I argue that he ultimately fails. This is down to an unacknowledged bourgeois attitude that informs the text, negating the positive potential of fantasy through condemning it as always childish and escapist. The trilogy redraws the line between real and not-real that acts to sustain the status quo, and projects as universal a very specific bourgeois individual psychology and attitude of compromise. The trilogy is limited by its structuring through an individual understanding of agency, ultimately leading to a representation of utopia as thoroughly unimaginable and distant from reality.

Finally, in the fifth chapter I look at the work of China Miéville. I argue that Miéville solves a great deal of the problems hitherto discovered through a straight reversal of the typical purity / impurity discourses. In Miéville the generic tendencies of sf, fantasy and the Weird are blended, allowing a representation and thinking through of material and historical structure *alongside* agency, in a dialectical relationship with agency. Further, I argue that Miéville's texts are constructed from a fundamentally impure perspective, containing multiple figures of the flaw, and expanding the ontological instability that figure provides outwards to encompass the entirety of the text. The notions of home, value, desire, identity, radical hope and defacement encountered as purity discourses in previous chapters now become framed in such a way that they allow the texts to represent and to narrate radical social change—the break itself. Finally, Miéville's work is understood as interpellating the reader into the position of a radical, utopian subjectivity—a position capable of generating cognitive insights. With Miéville's work the matter is not settled, there remain lacks and limitations, but the thesis concludes here, as the best current example of how genres of the fantastic can provide a critical opportunity to think beyond the imposed horizons of neoliberalism.

# 1.

## COGNITIVE IMPURITIES: A COMBINED APPROACH TO THE FANTASTIC

*The general stultification today is the direct result of cutting out utopia. When you reject utopia, thought itself withers away.*

—Theodor Adorno, *Towards a New Manifesto*

### Introduction

The twenty-first century has seen the rise of an exuberant new fiction that actively rejects traditional genre boundaries—the so-called post-genre fantastic. Distinguished by “a rapid hybridization between horror, Gothic, science fiction and ... ‘dark fantasy’” (Luckhurst 22), this new direction has arguably revitalised sf at a time when some of its most ardent and respected supporters were concerned by its rather moribund state.<sup>1</sup> China Miéville stands out as the most prominent and politically interesting exponent of this fiction, garnering numerous awards and critical acclaim from both genre and mainstream press, as well as a weight of academic attention.<sup>2</sup>

Miéville has previously referred to his work as “post-Seattle fiction” (“Long Live” 3), referring to the emergence—intriguingly symbiotic with the post-genre fantastic—of new protest movements that similarly reject traditional hierarchical organisation and division.<sup>3</sup> In a time of global ecological, economic, and political crises, when it has become commonplace to claim that a stagnant Left lacks imagination, this dual blossoming heralds a reinvigoration and reclamation of a hitherto languishing radical utopian impulse.<sup>4</sup> Not only is this revolutionary reimagining occurring in the separate realms of fiction and politics, but also—and in a fascinatingly condensed form—the two come together in the political critique of literature. Recently the long-

standing Suvinian paradigm for the political critique of the fantastic (from a Marxist perspective) has come under sustained fire from various quarters, not least from Miéville himself, in an attempt to make the whole of fantastic fiction a viable subject for political critique. Miéville writes in opposition to the hierarchical privileging of the strictly utopian and sf genres of the fantastic to be found in Suvin, and others like Fredric Jameson and Carl Freedman who work within the Suvinian paradigm, on the basis of the “scientific pretensions”, “epistemological gravity” and “dignified credentials” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 57) of those genres.<sup>5</sup> While I will argue, with Miéville, for the sweeping away of the sf/fantasy hierarchy, I will also argue that Suvin’s work has been misunderstood, and its political and ethical perspective is worth saving. It is vital that political criticism reinvigorates itself alongside its subjects, but it should not dismiss the very elements that give it potency.

This chapter firstly interrogates the anti-Suvinian sallies to sift what is essential in Suvin’s paradigm from what is merely vestigial, retaining and revitalising what I take to be the core utopian concept of cognition. It then goes on to outline a political critique of the fantastic as a whole, synthesising the concept of cognition with work done by Carl Freedman and Mark Bould on the paranoiac form of fantasy. It will do so by recasting the two approaches in terms of purity and impurity discourses, first described by Mary Douglas in her *Purity and Danger* (1966), incorporating later revisions suggested by Robbie Duschinsky. The basic premise is that, if the fantastic as a whole can be understood as driven by an impulse to logical coherence and closure, then the elements *within* a particular text that refuse or disrupt the text’s tendency to closure and coherence can be understood as marking the site of a potential radical political agency. Further, the way a particular text employs discourses of purity and impurity allows the critic to grasp the specific contours and functioning of ideology within a text, which shapes what that text is able to imagine, and what limits it places on the act of imagination.

## The Severity of Suvin

Since the publication of Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses* in 1979, sf has been separated from and privileged over other genres of the fantastic in the eyes of most literary critics, particularly those of a Marxist bent. This demarcation—memorably introduced by Suvin on the grounds that sf was capable of being a cognitive and progressive genre, where other fantastic genres were not—has had a surprisingly good innings. In 2000, a collection of essays by prominent sf critics stated they were “in no doubt that Suvin’s poetics have successfully outlived its moment” (Parrinder 10), and, over a decade later, the conversation continues. The emergent post-genre fictions demand a richer critical approach to accommodate them, and they push against the inertia of the Suvinian paradigm as it stands, which appears—in the parlance of our times—‘too big to fail.’

If the post-genre fantastic were to be judged from within the unforgiving constraints of the Suvinian paradigm, then the conclusion follows that the contamination of a supposedly ‘pure’ sf by any of the other, ‘irrational’ or ‘non-cognitive’ genres can only harm sf’s progressive potential, bringing (as Suvin would have it) ideology where once there was cognition, darkness where there was light (Suvin *Metamorphoses*: 8-9; *Positions*: 71).<sup>6</sup> The severity of this position is a problem, firstly because it simply refuses to engage a large and culturally significant swathe of texts, but also, more regrettably, because the growth of Suvin’s potent theory has been stunted by this refusal. When the creative energy of fantastic fiction—associated with radical critique since at least the Romantics (Löwy 197)—is breaking molds at the same time that the creative energy of political struggle erupts in unexpected and untraditional forms, dismissing the innovations of the former is as reactionary and unproductive as an old-guard Party member rejecting those of the latter out of hand.

That said, it would be equally rash to dismiss Suvin’s longstanding and politically charged paradigm without first examining it for some adamant remainder that survives the current critical onslaught. While Miéville’s interventions are, as we shall see, crucial in freeing future

work of the unnecessary constraints and misguided hierarchies of Suvin's theory, Miéville also calls for Marxist critique of fantastic fiction to cease its privileging of utopia as an analytical category, to focus rather on "alterity"—on the "unreality function" of the texts ("Cognition" 244; see also "Editorial"). In the restless political climate following the 2008 crash—of which Miéville's own fictional work is such a potent manifestation—this would be a mistake. The broadening of critical attention from generic sf and utopia to the whole of fantastic fiction is to be embraced, but rather than diminish critical attentiveness to the utopia function of the fantastic, utopia should, as I shall argue, become immanent to the critical lens we turn on all fantastic texts. The radically ethical and utopian demands that shape the true core of the Suvinian paradigm should not be diluted but instead renewed, retooled, and readied to once again join battle.

While this thesis is not the place for an in-depth historical comparison, it is, I think, useful to note before we begin that the Miéville/Suvin debate bears an uncanny—we might say undead—resemblance to that famously conducted between Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács in *Das Wort* in 1938, long since embalmed in the classic Marxist tract *Aesthetics and Politics* (Adorno et al.). Suvin has always claimed the affinity of sf with "realist" literature over the fantastic,<sup>7</sup> and on reading the exchange, the reader would be forgiven for hearing Suvin, rather than Lukács, railing against an "abstract and one-dimensional" fantasy, with its "ideology of escapism" that "remain[s] static and devoid of inner tension," "emotionally and intellectually ... frozen in [its] own immediacy" (37, 19, 39, 36), in contrast to good sf, which works by "abandoning and transcending the limits of immediacy, by scrutinising all subjective experiences and measuring them against social reality" (37). Likewise one can hear (in a chronological unlikelihood suitable for the context), Bloch channeling Miéville in his retort that the fantastic is of course "composed partly of archaic images, but partly too of revolutionary fantasies which were critical and often quite specific ... even if it was undisciplined and uncontrolled," while decrying the fact that "[a]lmost all forms of opposition to the ruling class which are not communist from the outset are

lumped together with the ruling class itself” (21). He concludes that “to cling to such a black-and-white approach seems less appropriate than ever; it is mechanical, not dialectical” (21)—a statement that surely earns its keep in any age.<sup>8</sup>

In a review of *Red Planets*—home of Miéville’s most sustained anti-Suvinian sally (“Cognition”)—Stephen Shapiro notes that the collection stands as “one of the best recent surveys into current thinking on left aesthetics,” and that “one could hardly get a better training in such arguments than by reading the dossier of twentieth-century debates in *Aesthetics and Politics* and then turning to *Red Planets*” (117). The comparison is well made but the trenches have not moved quite so far as this makes it sound, though the no-man’s land is littered with the burnt-out hulks of spaceships and the scorched bones of dragons rather than the remains of Realism and Expressionism. The debate is comparable: whether the less ‘objectively mimetic’ genres are mere decadence or not. Despite his theoretical influences coming far more from the utopianism of Bloch and the poetics of Brecht, it happens that Suvin, having marked out a privileged space for good sf and tying it to a particular attendance and relation to realism, and then rejecting the remainder, finds himself thrust into Lukács’ place by the simple movement of history, revealing what is vital and what vestigial or ideological in his approach. The untouched fissure at the core of this old debate—the finitude of subjective experience, the essentially contradictory unity of the social whole, and artistic efforts generated to represent it (Adorno et al. 14)—can be usefully borne in mind as the active volcanic vent that drives now, just as it did then, the contemporary evolutions of form and the value-arguments that surround Marxist approaches to it.

### **Miéville’s Intervention**

As author, critic and Marxist, Miéville is in the perfect position to both suffer the chafing of the Suvinian paradigm and to shatter it. He makes clear in a number of critical pieces that he finds Suvin’s hierarchical divide between sf and non-sf to be untenable, and that he believes it “stands

as perhaps the major obstruction to theoretical progress in the field” (“Cognition” 233). Miéville argues that fantasy *as a whole* is an object worthy of study, particularly to Marxism which—despite a history of interest in the fantastic—continues to disdain its current popular forms (“Editorial” 41). He voices the importance of interrogating “a cultural terrain that clearly attracts such popular interest” while also excising “an ironically (capitalist) modern distinction of high and low culture”. But the most crucial reason he gives, in a clear echo of Bloch’s earlier position, is that ultimately “[r]eal’ life under capitalism is a *fantasy*,” and as such fantasy is an artistic mode that “mimics the ‘absurdity’ of capitalist modernity” and may offer valuable insights into the “peculiar nature of modern social reality and subjectivity” were it not suffering from such theoretical disdain (“Editorial” 40-2). As Mark Bould puts it elsewhere, “it is the very fantasy of fantasy as a mode that ... gives it space for a hard-headed critical consciousness of capitalist subjectivity” (“The Dreadful Credibility” 83-4). This idea that the fantastic is particularly suited to providing insights into modern social reality and subjectivity will be returned to later.

With the larger goal of establishing the critical worth of fantasy in mind, Miéville moves to tear down the wall between sf and fantasy in his “Cognition as Ideology”—a seemingly devastating immanent critique of the Suvinian paradigm. His argument begins from the widely-held position that Suvin’s definition of sf is non-functional because, in its stringent demands for cognition, it precludes entry for the vast majority of actually-existing sf. This claim rests primarily on the common and fairly straightforward conflation of Suvinian cognition with currently accepted scientific plausibility. If cognition is considered in this way, any sf that strays from scientific possibility—by containing time-travel for example—will have to be excised from the genre. The claim made is that pretty much all sf—at least since Wells annoyed Verne with his flights of scientific-ish fancy,<sup>9</sup> or even back to Mary Shelley and her monster—has been stuffed with pseudo-science, and so Suvin’s demand for the “cognitive dominant,” with its “prescriptive nature and counterintuitive exclusions” is unsustainable (Bould, “On Carl Freedman” 300).

Clearly, the presence of validated science has nothing to do with sf and—with the idea of salvaging Suvin's theoretical apparatus, which he holds to be “not only fundamentally sound but indispensable”—Carl Freedman, in his *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, concedes as much (17). Rather than cognition as the necessary generic marker of sf, Freedman offers the “cognition effect,” which moves the emphasis from actual, scientifically validated cognition to the presence within the text of a voice that creates the “effect” of such cognition. While the purpose of this is to keep the critical dogs at bay, in fact it opens the way for Miéville to dissolve any boundary between ‘rational’ sf and ‘irrational’ fantasy. Given the presence of the cognition effect “across the spectrum of SF, from [...] the scientifically correct [...] to those based on the wildly spurious,” Miéville claims “the effect’s fundamental driver cannot be cognitive logic itself”. Neither is it derived from a “cognitively logical and rigorous ‘scientific’ register”: ultimately, “SF relies above all not on the language of science, nor on the command of that language, but on the *appearance* of that command” (“Cognition” 237-8). The cognition effect is “*something done with language by someone to someone*”: it is “a *persuasion*,” a function of the authorial authority to which the reader submits (235, 242). Thus sf can be seen as ideological “*at the level of form*,” which goes beyond the particular content of a text (242)—this is, of course, the suspension of disbelief that is part of the entry price of enjoying an sf or fantasy story. Taking this line of thought to its conclusion, Miéville finds that,

[t]o the extent that SF claims to be based on ‘science,’ and indeed on what is deemed ‘rationality,’ it is based on capitalist modernity’s ideologically projected self-justification: not some abstract/ideal ‘science,’ but capitalist science’s bullshit about itself. (240)<sup>10</sup>

In this argument, Suvin is seen as privileging sf based on a model of idealised “scientific rationality” as progressive and in opposition to a reactionary irrationalism, a model that Miéville



claims to lie at the heart of mainstream Marxist sf theory, and which is surely “a bad joke after World War 1, let alone after the death camps” (241). As such, Suvin’s claims for the ideologically liberating potential of sf, through the process of cognitive estrangement, are undercut by their apparently being irrevocably enmeshed in a narrow capitalist rationality and the concomitant conceptions of a beneficial ‘progress’ that is to be gained through its application. Here Miéville’s objection is as much political as it is formal, and we will come back to the relationship of sf to the modern capitalist imaginary a little later. Finally, having demonstrated that sf is just as much “an ideological product” in its form and content as fantasy, Miéville returns to the traditional Marxist privileging of sf over fantasy: since neither is more “scientifically rational” in an ideal sense than the other, the contrast drawn by Suvin “no longer has teeth” (242). In the face of this argument, it becomes undeniable that the presence or absence of cognition (as Miéville presents it) is not a suitable way to define or privilege genres.

With Freedman’s demotion of cognition to the cognition effect, a fault-line was apparently thrust through the core of the Suvinian position, opening a chasm into which the whole theoretical apparatus would fall. I argue, however, that Freedman’s critical maneuver does not do what it claims; what he does with his cognition effect is not refine Suvinian cognition as Bould and Miéville argue, but rather delineate a separate literary concept. The cognition effect is in fact an iteration of the venerable literary effect of verisimilitude, given an sf-specific coloring achieved through “a range of shared rhetorical devices” (Bould, “On Carl Freedman” 301), akin to Miéville’s “appearance of mastery over scientific language,” and including some of the lexical techniques that Samuel Delany has described so well (cf. *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, for example). The cognition effect is the production of a verisimilitude to contemporary norms of what is considered reasonable and realistic, and is thus, as Miéville claims, an ideological effect.<sup>11</sup>

There is a hint even in Miéville’s argument that the cognition effect does not actually usurp cognition when he claims to have “split the cognition effect from cognition and its logic”

(“Cognition” 238), but there is no clear description anywhere of how cognition as such—as opposed to the literary effect—is actually to be understood. In the end, it remains, as Miéville himself describes it, an “evasive” term which “few of its deployers engage with sufficiently” (246). What immediately follows is an effort to right this wrong: to engage with this difficult term and demonstrate that it is a concept worth rejuvenating, both because of the insight it can give into the contemporary fantastic as a whole, and the powerful and necessary ethical and utopian impulse it can give to critical work.

## **Recognising Cognition**

We can begin with the way Miéville himself deploys the term in his ‘Editorial’:

in acknowledging that unscientific but internally plausible/rigorous, estranging works share crucial qualities of cognitive seriousness, Freedman illuminates how what is usually deemed the specificity of sf can be shared by fantasy. The incoherent—not to say ad hoc—cognition often seen as part and parcel of ‘fantasy’ can be found in much ‘sf.’ (44).

Here it seems that Miéville is using cognition to describe a potential quality of the fantastic other than sf’s cognitive effect—if some sf could actually be properly cognitive, then so could some fantasy and, further, the presence of cognition in a text could be considered a mark of distinction. As Suvin claimed (and his remarks should be broadened to include fantasy), the “cognitive ... element become[s] a measure of aesthetic quality, of the specific pleasure to be sought in SF” (*Metamorphoses* 15). Clearly this cognition is not some narrow adherence to scientific possibility, nor to the appearance of that adherence. The best description of the particular conception of cognition that Miéville is here employing is the following, rich passage by Gwyneth Jones, which is worth quoting at length:

Few of us realise how casually our worlds of perception are furnished.... If all the cars in the world were suddenly present only in so far as they were perceived, the roads would be filled with an army of coloured moving blurs, most of them completely empty under the hood and quite a few with nothing underneath to hold the wheels together. Cars would become like the content-empty “futuristic” props in bad sf. The props of good sf, however, denied the protection of custom and habit, have to be built more soundly than the shadows with which we lazily surround ourselves in real life [...] This method does not only apply to the construction of a convincing technological innovation, but to any degree of difference. We want to change something in the nature of human relationships? Then we must ask, what is a social relationship, essentially? What are its necessities? How does it develop? We scrape off the brand names and remodel the world beneath the surface. (18-19).

It is clear that this type of cognition—a certain quality of logical rigor in the text, of fullness, and an awareness of the underlying functioning of things beyond the phenomenal—can be found in both sf and fantasy, and attests to the depth of perception and the intricacy of critical understanding that the author brings to the construction of his or her fantastic text. It is, of course, a very particular understanding—a systematic one, where we might apply Robert Scholes’ “awareness of the universe as a system of systems, a structure of structures” (8) beyond the limits of sf, as a technically minded mode—a rational mode—of critically apprehending the world. The necessity of this type of cognition (which bears a significant similarity to Marx’s theory of mystification and fetish) to a work of good sf is clearly present in Suvin’s thinking, though this type of logical rigor should be understood more as a necessary stage to cognition, rather than cognition proper. Jones’ mention of “content-empty ‘futuristic’ props”—the

superficial elements of a work lacking in “cognitive seriousness”—resonates with Suvin’s belittling of sf that is merely a western with ray-guns (*Metamorphoses* 23)—an uncritical rehashing of traditional narratives and normative thought-patterns, hung with the superficial novelty of sf garb. In such narratives, the techno-science could easily be in line with contemporary scientific thinking, and they would be lent the “scientific pretensions”

Jameson talks about (*Archaeologies* 57) and so be cognitive for Suvin according to the commonplace interpretation of his work. Clearly, something has been missed here.

In fact, Suvin’s issue with such texts (and, I would suggest, this is always the issue for Suvin) lies with the fact that these “juvenile adventure stories ... destroy people’s ability to judge both SF and real human relations” (*Metamorphoses* 24). His position is that human relations and narrative action depicted in non-cognitive sf are governed by an essentialising and universalist (i.e. ideological) standpoint, rather than an understanding of social reality and human possibility as being historically and materially contingent (i.e. a cognitive standpoint). The depth of the estrangement (and the *cognition*, correctly understood) for Suvin is directly relative to the text’s ability to reveal the historical specificity of contemporaneous human relations—to penetrate the fantastic surface (scrape off the brand names) and allow the cognition of a certain pattern of affairs that is otherwise obscured, to thereby allow the following movement back to a clearer and more concrete understanding of phenomenal social reality, and to allow human activity to be based on a clearer understanding of the situation at hand. This is a fundamentally Marxist demand on literature, echoing Lukács in its movement from surface experience, through a deeper abstraction, back to a newly enriched phenomenal, a “new immediacy ... sufficiently transparent to allow the underlying essence to shine through” (Adorno et al. 39). The “science” that truly matters for Suvin is the science of historical materialism and the creed of always historicise: cognition, then, for Suvin is a denial and disruption of “nominalist essentialism and dogmatic teleology” (“Darwinism” 7). This refinement (or clarification) of Suvin’s thought can be

seen in his more recent and slightly reworded definition of sf as a genre “defined by the interaction of estrangement and historical cognition, and whose main formal device is a narrative chronotope and/or agents alternative to the author’s empirical world” (“Of Starship Troopers” 116).<sup>12</sup>

It is by now familiar to note that Suvin’s “cognitive estrangement” finds its roots in Brecht’s *V-effekt*. But perhaps these roots, and the full weight and meaning of their influence, have faded from view in the inevitable over-familiarity that comes with the reduction of a body of thought to a hyphenated buzzword. We have seen already that it is crucial for Suvin that “aesthetic standards [be] linked to the cognitive adequacy of the work of art” (“The Mirror” 57)—a demand he takes from Brecht. Crucially, this demand is not merely for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment, but is “an ethical imperative” (67). Far from being a matter of ‘scientific validity’, or even primarily an aesthetic matter, cognition is in fact a matter of ethical imperative for Suvin, and should be first and foremost understood as such. Cognition is that insight within a text that brings us a step closer to the collective utopian horizon of communism (the rationally organised society), or at the least prepares us in thought for taking such a step in practice. This is cognition: a process that allows the “cognitive increment [...] [gained from a] significant fictional re-presentation of relations among people [that] presents the reader with the possibility of rearticulating our political relationships” (Suvin, “Cognition, Freedom” 510). Ray-guns and spaceships—and dragons and wizards—are only interesting if they allow a genuine reimagining of social relations, of essentialised notions of human nature, of apparently inevitable teleologies, of the ideologically imposed conceptual limits of the present. It is, finally, a judgment: to couple it in the phrase ‘cognitive estrangement’ is to conceive of the realm of the fantastic as capable of impeding or aiding the pleasure of human existence, by obscuring or clarifying actually-existing social relations. Hence the obscure shards from Suvin’s article “Considering the Sense of ‘Fantasy’” in which, as Miéville notes, he presents “intriguing fragments of an alternative theory”

of cognition, which “‘include[s] people rather than being dominated by abstractions ... is narratively coherent with ‘richness of figures’ ... and is ‘pleasantly useful’” (“Cognition” 246). The meaning and relation of these fragments is clear when they are placed within the larger picture I am proposing.

### **Clearing Away the Debris of History**

At this point, the objection might be raised that—even if my reading of Suvin’s cognition is accepted—Suvin’s paradigm still requires an attitude suspiciously faithful to the ideas of scientific progress and rationality, the capitalist-tainted realities that were the focus of Miéville’s attack in the first place. However, science and rationality are not immutable ideals for Suvin. To take science first; at least as far back as 1980, Suvin—far from blindly investing faith in some Ideal Science—made the exact same point Miéville throws at him some thirty years later, in almost exactly the same words:

[I]t is the practical lesson of what bourgeois value-free science lends itself to in either classical bourgeois, fascist or bolshevik hands—to concentration camps, atom bombs, ecocide, and so on—which should prevent every thinking being (not to mention every socialist) from accepting it as anything more than an extremely powerful, sometimes liberating, often potentially useful, but finally also quite sinister ideology. (“On Two Notions” 33).

This is a stance that he has maintained consistently. For Suvin there is no pure Ideal Science that inevitably progresses, but rather a potent method that—Janus-faced—can be and is bent to serve encompassing political beliefs. Capitalist science is clearly not the only one that bullshits, and the notion of a value-free science is for Suvin an ideology—science as method must also subject itself

to a historical-materialist analysis, must also be aware of its own contingency and social conditions of emergence in this respect. Science is not cognition, but is capable of it, and (genuine) scientific progress is possible in the same sense that Suvin once defined sf as a progressive literature, in that it is capable, but not guaranteed, of providing a cognitive increment, a step towards a better future that can only be grasped against a life-affirming horizon, occluded by the narrower horizon of capital. The same argument pertains to the claim against Suvin's too-narrow notion of rationality. He is aware of and opposes the narrow, bourgeois rationality that understands the price of everything and the value of nothing. He shares with Miéville the latter's desire for "a richer, socially embedded rationality, which would not be a degraded embarrassment" ("Cognition" 241). As such, cognition, as I have described it, bears something in common with scientific *practice*, in an ideal sense, in that it strives to refute and disabuse nominalist essentialisms and dogmatic teleologies. But it has the most in common with the 'science' of historical materialism, in that any knowledge it produces is understood to be itself always contingent upon the socio-historical circumstances of its production, and always open to reassessment: it is a fluid, evolving organon.

A split must be made here, however, as I have been trying to make throughout, between what is useful and good in Suvin's work and what is vestigial; what are fluid and evolving concepts, open to the contingencies of history, and what is stifling. While Suvin's concepts of rationality, science, and cognition are potentially historical materialist tools and capable of context-dependent flexibility, he has corralled them within a conceptual generic space that severely limits their freedom and, with the passing of time and changing of circumstance (particularly the global saturation of neoliberalism), they—fossilised—become mere ideology. It is precisely this demand of history, immanent in Suvin's paradigm, which now brings about the necessity to slough off the unnecessary constrictions that stunt that paradigm.

With hindsight we can see the historical contingencies that pushed Suvin into his selective blindness as to where cognition could and could not be found. It is now often remarked that Suvin's critical-theoretical intervention and selective privileging of sf against the Other of fantasy was "early, strategic and positional, a way of legitimating the value of science fiction" (Luckhurst 23). Outside purely academic considerations, Suvin's argument was in keeping with the historical circumstances of his politics: "[it] makes sense for his historical moment, a time when reactionary Tolkienism increasingly dominated fantasy writing [...] [A]cademic arguments belong to their own time, and Suvin's was in the aftermath of the New Left's disintegration, one blamed in part (quite wrongly!) on the rise of esoteric hippie-ism" (Shapiro 120). And as Franco Berardi notes, the prevailing understanding of the "future" in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was

[a] psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations [...] shaped in the conceptual frameworks of an ever progressing development [...]: the Hegelo-Marxist mythology of *Aufhebung* and instauration of the new totality of Communism; the bourgeois mythology of a linear development of welfare and democracy; the technocratic mythology of the all encompassing power of scientific knowledge. (13)

It can be argued that these conditions pushed Suvin into an over-optimistic investment in the discourses of a too-narrow 'rational' social and scientific progress, and blinded him to the more sinister ideological qualities pertaining to all sf, as Miéville describes. There was certainly a discernible attitude in *Metamorphoses* that Suvin calls "mutedly triumphalist, expecting ... probable socialist victory" ("Considering" 213).

Since the publication of *Metamorphoses* in 1979—not inconsequently at the dawn of the neoliberal age and the boom-time of narrow instrumental-rationalist paradigms in economics



and politics—the world has altered rapidly.<sup>13</sup> The West, and elsewhere, are now places of proliferating pseudo-novums; an “*Immerwiedergleiche*, the ever again recurring whirligig of fads that do not better human relationships” (Suvin “Novum is” 16). Scientific and technological progress are increasingly unhitched from Suvin’s core concern of an improvement of human relationships, and hitched instead to the profit motive: they spawn a monstrous collection of pseudo-novums “within the mega-fake novum of science transubstantiated into capital” (18). The post-2008 moment, with its global crises, uprisings, protests, and austerities, offers increasing incentive to a creeping dislocation of popular hope from ‘capitalist science’s bullshit about itself’, and the neoliberal regimes (political and corporate) that borrow the rational language (particularly the ‘science’ of capitalist economics and the epistemological There Is No Alternative ‘realism’ of politics) and utopian projections (the promises of commodities and globalisation) of the former to justify its actions in the face of public opposition. Coupled with this is the total failure of sf to live up to Suvin’s demand that it be “wiser than the world it speaks to” (*Metamorphoses* 36), evidenced in Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s and John Clute’s tandem laments that “social imagination becomes science-fictional, and the novum ... an ironic model of quotidian reality” (Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *Seven Beauties* 59), as “triumph (understanding the worlds we can speak) and failure (uttering projections for owners) have become very nearly the same thing” (Clute 68). It is at this point that it becomes necessary to recognise that sf strictly defined is no longer capable of estranging us from the hegemonic discourse for which it operates as ideological cheerleader. It is limited, as Miéville demonstrates, by an orientation towards alterity articulated through an idealised imaginary of capitalist enlightenment and progress. Just as H.G. Wells turned to the authority of scientific patter to domesticate his fanciful narratives when he could not squeeze belief out of magic anymore,<sup>14</sup> so too the authority of specifically capitalist science and rationality, linked to specifically neoliberal governmental and economic practices, and its promises of progress are falling into doubt, and that doubt should be encouraged. It is precisely

for this reason, as I will demonstrate, that the creative and utopian energy in genres of the fantastic is currently manifesting in the erosion and destruction of the false, self-crowned purity of that discourse. To reanimate Bloch once more:

Are there not dialectical links between growth and decay? Are confusion, immaturity and incomprehensibility always and in every case to be categorized as bourgeois decadence? Might they not equally—in contrast with this simplistic and surely unrevolutionary view—be part of the transition from the old world to the new? Or at least be part of the struggle leading to that transition? This is an issue which can only be resolved by concrete examination of the works themselves; it cannot be settled by omniscient *parti-pris* judgements. (Adorno et al. 23)

While cognitive estrangement may yet prove to be something of a co-variant law, its variants—‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’—have changed value over the years, and with them have necessarily changed the meaning and content of ‘scientific progress,’ ‘rationality,’ and even ‘utopia.’ The problem with the Suvinian paradigm lay in his creation of a universal abstraction of exactly the type he sought to dismantle. By delineating the strict ‘pure’ genre of sf and privileging its relation to a posited realism (and concomitantly limited notions of rationality, scientific progress, and utopia), Suvin invoked the same obfuscating logic of essentialism and dogmatic teleology against which he wished to struggle, and his paradigm threw up walls within which its living concepts petrified.

Cognition cannot be something that is everywhere and always the same, and always found in the same place. It is a product of the conditions from which it emerges, and so it will metamorphose, and manifest differently under different conditions. Marx once described communism as “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of

this movement result from the premises now in existence” (*The German Ideology* 57). This also stands as an excellent description of cognition, the conceptual overlap being completely appropriate for the comparison. Both are a *process*, the particular manifestation of which results from present conditions, and which reveals itself as such by abolishing or threatening to abolish the present state of things. So it is both universal in its properties *and* particular in its characteristics. Formally it does the same thing every time, but any *particular* manifestation of it is dependent for its qualities upon the socio-historical circumstances in which it is found. To make the metaphorical substitution from communism to cognition complete, cognition is not something fixed, nor is it something that can only occur within science-fictional texts. Rather it is to be sought in the elements within a text that work against a text’s ideological closure and resolution, and its manifestation is dependent in each case upon the specific symbolic field of each specific text. Cognition is then both universal in its properties and particular in its manifestations.

It is exactly the feedback of this new century that demands this reworking of Suvin’s position—the cognitive estrangement of cognitive estrangement—and a re-cognition of rationality as Miéville proposes. We also need to recognise the continued importance of the utopian impulse and its continued—even renewed—presence in the post-genre fantastic. To briefly anticipate a conclusion both of this chapter and, ultimately, of my argument as a whole: it is in the breaking down of expected narrative forms, and *consciously taking the encompassing form as object*, that the utopian impulse is to be found today; the modes of the post-genre fantastic express cognition and the utopian impulse at the level of form, particularly through generic interpenetration. The question that remains is how, exactly, to expand the notion of ‘cognition’ across the fantastic as a whole, which leads me to another, more contemporary and less developed Marxist theory of the fantastic: what we might call Carl Freedman and Mark Bould’s ‘paranoid theory of the fantastic’.

## Paranoia & the Fantastic

Freedman, in an insightful and somewhat neglected 1984 article “Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick”, suggests that sf as a whole demonstrates a tendency to “totalization and logical coherence” (24) that marks paranoia as a privileged lens through which to understand the genre. Bould (“The Dreadful Credibility”) picks up this notion and expands it to the fantastic as a whole, seeing it as united by the foregrounding of “world-building [...] the paranoid construction of textual ontologies” (81). I take this insight as operating on two levels. In terms of form and content, what we are talking about here is closure: the construction of a text with a plot and a world-setting for the plot, which are internally consistent, or at least, where snags and contradictions are smoothed over and obscured. Causes lead to effects, the geography makes sense, character motives become clear, the narrative trundles on, typically chronologically, and so on. Despite its fantastic ‘unreality’ everything is explicable *in the logic of the text and the world of the text*. In ideological terms, on the other hand, this tendency to closure manifests through the subtle or not-so-subtle reinforcing of dominant ideological norms through the dominant ontological, epistemological and aesthetic logics of the text *whatever the apparently transgressive form and content*.<sup>15</sup>

Bould’s intervention in particular was in part a response to rather over-celebratory theories of the fantastic such as Rosemary Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. These theories privilege the fantastic as somehow *inherently transgressive*, as if just showing something that is ‘not-real’ and yet *is* will do the job of unsettling the surface of hegemonically validated ‘reality’ and norms of rationality. Bould dismisses this, and points out that fantasy in general has a tendency to merely flirt cathartically with transgression, if at all, and sees Jackson’s understanding of the fantastic as therapeutic, rather than genuinely political. But the problem with a theory of the fantastic that considers this paranoid urge to closure as the defining characteristic of the fantastic, as Bould does, is that it leaves no room at all for transgression, and no room, to come

back full circle, for cognition as I've described it. However, Bould overlooks the implications of his own argument: he claims that the act of paranoiac world-building so clearly manifest by fantastic texts is akin to the same paranoiac-like act of 'constructing ontologies' that each individual performs day in-day out, that

holds the fuzzily-determined subject together, [...] shuttling between the vast array of subject positions on offer, which must in some way be reconciled with each other if the subject is ever to feel unified or whole. (80)

It follows, I would claim, that while this act of fantasising *seeks* unity, it will, in the manner of Jameson's 'political unconscious', inevitably fail on some level, and remnants of antagonistic, transgressive, radical and *cognitive* contradictions (and in the specific terms of Bould's description, radical *subject positions* with regards to the normative demands of the status quo) will remain. So I'd like to propose initially that we are better saying that a paranoid hermeneutic is not *the* constitutive impulse of fantasy as such, but rather a constitutive mode of imagination greatly exacerbated under the irrational regime of capital. It's a mode of imagination that is striving to make sense of the world, that is striving to gain some intellectual grasp on the objective machinations of reality (the warp and woof of social forms and relations, institutions; the flux and flow of economics, politics; imaginary structures like nationalisms, cultures; reading beneath the fetishised surface of commodity production; and so on). These efforts toward understanding have a tendency to rely on and so reproduce dominant socio-cultural norms, in the guise of unquestioned essentialisms and teleologies, which are the very things that impede the imagination of genuine alternatives in the first place. It's an ideologically saturated mode of imagination that currently finds its clearest articulation in the fantastic (perhaps, simply, because of *just how much imagining* is required, *just how much of a world* needs creating). But equally, it must

also inevitably register those conceptual cracks and lived contradictions that ideologies work to smooth over, and which can be exposed to unmask ideological claims to universality and essence, and to potentially contribute to the radical subjective positions to which those critical insights orient an individual.

If we accept these premises, then my next question would be: in what precise way is the fantastic cognitive? How would the two impulses of paranoia and cognition interact within a text? How would we recognise the cognitive? We have two opposing impulses, one to order and consistency, but which has a tendency to mistake map for ground, to impute an ontological certainty (rather like classical realism) where there is only the effect of reality, on the one hand, and on the other cognition, which is a demand for a historical, structural knowledge, disrupting the hegemonic ideology and its smoothing over of contradiction. In these terms then, I would claim that cognition is that which erupts into the text and forces a realisation of contingency, a refusal of essence, a refusal of the paranoid closure, and which marks a moment of real insight, beyond or against the ideology of the text, that denies naturalised teleologies, and allows for a significant representation of human relations.<sup>16</sup>

## **Purity & Impurity**

With the aim of uniting the two impulses within a working theory, the antagonistic discourses of purity and impurity are useful in formulating a functioning synthesis, as they map very well onto the pairing of paranoiac impulse and transgressive cognition, and allow them to be thought together, as well as providing a means of identifying the two at the levels of representation and conceptual characteristics. Mary Douglas first attempted to systematise these in her seminal work, *Purity and Danger* (1966). As Douglas has it, purity and impurity are to be taken as representational, aesthetic and symbolic markers of more fundamental, ontological concerns. Discourses of purity mark our efforts “to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (4)

and make it “conform to an idea”(2). These ideas then take on significant cultural and social organisational power, and slip from pragmatic necessity to being seen as a truth about the way the world is fundamentally organised and divided up. Robert Duschinsky has improved upon this beginning through the insight that, rather than order as such, purity marks discursively constructed ‘essences’. For Duschinsky, “[d]iscourses of purity/impurity [...] are best conceptualised as discourses that *adjudicate the relative correspondence of phenomena and forms of subjectivity with an imputed self-identity*” (71). In other words, phenomena marked as ‘pure’ are deployed *as if they were self-sufficient and True, sprung fully formed and ahistorical straight from the ontological ground of Being*, as opposed to being a contingent and transient product of socio-historical forces.

Human efforts towards purity and order in the world have the consequence of creating a stable and predictable environment for action, in the continuation of which individuals, groups and institutions, develop a vested interest (Bauman 7). Impurity, on the other hand, takes its manifestations from the outlines of purity—impurity is whatever doesn’t fit, cannot be assimilated into a particular order, and threatens to contaminate a particular essence (and, significantly, threatens whatever actually-existing social relations and institutions that have been premised and organised around the asserted reality of that essence and order). 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century US racial debates over the ‘one drop’ rule, are instructive here, and the automatic hypodescent or assignation of mixed children to the subordinate race, let alone justifications for slavery and empire, demonstrate how these ideological discourses manifest in the organisation of the material world.

We can see the relevance to the paranoiac impulse of fantasy, which is doubtless a ‘pure’ discourse as Bould describes it, driven to encompass and explain, to resolve contradictions, and oppress or repress any ‘impurities’. In practice, the construction of a discourse of purity tends to lend it the appearance of being necessary as opposed to contingent, ‘natural’ rather than

constructed: the map is mistaken for the ground. There are obvious similarities to the functioning of ideology. Duschinsky notes that:

representations of purity occur regarding phenomena which are thereby depicted as the simple expression of a self-identical essence, rather than in part the product of contingent historical and material processes. In such cases, discourses of purity and impurity can be deployed to smuggle unwarranted, and often political, assumptions into debates about the true nature of people, processes or the world. (73)<sup>17</sup>

If the paranoiac impulse of fantasy is a discourse of purity, then impurity can be understood as potentially *cognitive*; the ‘real movement’ that can abolish the present order. As Douglas notes:

Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power. (95)

Impurity marks potential—for the destruction of the status quo and the ideological essentialism that it rests on, and also for remaking, re-patterning—conceptually, socially and materially. It marks the potential for a re-imagination of social relations with genuinely radical implications.

Finally, and importantly for the cultural critic, purity and impurity discourses also provide an approach to the text that gives an aesthetic or representational dimension to the theories of paranoia and cognition—any ideology will imbue or overlay the given material world along



borders and lines of conflict of purity and impurity, lending to individuals, groups, events or phenomena the conceptual and visual properties of both—stasis, purity, cleanliness, order, consecration, sanctification, essence on the one hand, dirt, danger, flux, impermanence on the other. The actual manifestation of this is incredibly varied, each text, each object of analysis has its own specific distribution and interaction of purities and impurities, as the close readings in the following chapters will demonstrate.

## Conclusion

To summarise: Instead of understanding, like Jackson, the fantastic as a whole as ‘transgressive’, I propose we see it, like Bould, as ideologically saturated and driven by closure: but further, I propose to understand as transgressive those specific elements *within* the text which resist the logical, narrative or symbolic closure *of* the text. The transgressions will manifest as impurities, and they will be cognitive in the sense of articulating or pointing towards something that refuses the ideological presuppositions, essentialisms and teleologies that inform the text, and which mark, like a finger pointing at the moon, the potential for a genuine reimagining of social relations. The following chapters contain a series of close readings that will apply and further elucidate this theoretical foundation, as well as adding to and refining it where appropriate.

Finally, it should be noted that while the theory is applicable to fantasy as a whole it is, like any theory, a product of its times. It was developed partly in response to the urgent demand made upon political literary criticism by the work of China Miéville, with whose work this thesis culminates, in order to create a critical approach that was capable of treating properly with the post-generic fantastic without losing its political and utopian edge. As such, it is possible to see the following chapters not only as readings produced by a new approach, but also as figurations of a theoretical cognition only made possible by the emergence of a novel and generically transgressive literature—a living example of the theory itself.

## 2.

# CANNED DREAMS: NEOLIBERALISM, NOSTALGIA AND CAPTIVE FUTURES IN THE US SOCIAL IMAGINARY (& *IRON MAN 3*)

*The more one is absorbed in fighting Evil, the less one is tempted to place the Good in question.*

—Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*

### Introduction

It has become a commonplace that the political, socio-economic and cultural dominant of our times is neoliberalism, championed particularly by the US and symbiotic with the discourse of globalisation. In an era that no longer claims to believe in grand narratives, this discourse nonetheless provides one by masquerading as ‘realism’ rather than ideology, ‘rational progress’ rather than overtly utopian telos. In truth however, neoliberalism “endeavours to create a social reality that it suggests already exists” (Lemke 203), premised on an essentialised notion of human nature as selfish and rational, while globalisation proclaims a teleology of the natural and inevitable spread and intensification of that reality across the globe and into the future. Such a fragile reality-in-the-making must be constantly reaffirmed, relying as it does on the constant dissemination of persuasive purity discourses, which justify the neoliberal world-view and mode of social organisation by mapping it onto ontological truth-claims as to the underlying nature of humanity and reality.<sup>18</sup> Even in the neoliberal heartlands of the US and UK, the financial crisis of 2008 has hardened opinion against neoliberal policy, yet simultaneously, in the eyes of its proponents, only made the need for it ever more urgent.<sup>19</sup>

The struggle over how the present and the future are imagined registers itself clearly in multiple narratives from the superhero-movie genre, grown hugely in popularity and output since the turn of the millennium, and to which the conceptual connection with capitalist modernity is well established.<sup>20</sup> This chapter will focus on Iron Man in particular as the superhero most suffused with science-fictional tropes, whose generic leanings facilitate a particularly privileged symbolic apparatus through which contemporary understandings of history, futurity and progress are articulated, and who will be understood as an ideal vehicle for propagating neoliberal purity discourses.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Iron Man (or rather, his alter-ego Tony Stark) is a capitalist, and in many ways an old-fashioned industrialist,<sup>22</sup> uniquely positioned to register the effects of encroaching neoliberalism, and the struggle to resolve the tension between an idealised productive capitalism of old—metonymic to a US Golden Age of Fordism, productivity, confidence, global hegemony (and to an extent, esteem) and a romanticised social harmony—and the speculative, insecure and financialised neoliberal present, with fading hegemony and a growing social unrest, all promising to extend into the future. It is this positioning of Iron Man (at once social, symbolic and generic) that acts as the fulcrum around which contemporary concerns can turn. In this chapter I will be looking in depth specifically at the most recent example, *Iron Man 3* (2013), a film concerned with technology and war; productive capital vs. speculative capital; the rise of state-capitalist China on the world stage and the US's loss of solo superpower status; the apparent threat of Islamic fundamentalism; the role of government in the contemporary neoliberal world-system; and even the health-care system—a perfect storm of contemporary concerns from the front-line of the neoliberal agenda.

The following analysis will demonstrate, through close reading, how the film appears to demonise the neoliberal project, symbolising it—in the antagonist Killian—as a threat to a nostalgic ideal of productive, 'humane' Fordist capital—embodied by Tony Stark (Iron Man)—and playing out on screen a very real socio-economic drama, but in the end performs the

ideological work of providing a merely symbolic closure and catharsis, smoothing over the contradictions inherent in its own logic, reinforcing the status quo and diffusing or occluding any real attempt at imagining alternatives. Meanwhile, Killian's character acts a highly-cathected lightning rod of the contemporary US anxieties mentioned above: not only of the neoliberal project, but also the dominance (and brutal failure) of finance and speculative capital and immaterial labour in the US; fading global hegemony; genetic manipulation; terrorism. It is all of these often contradictory fears that are overcome by the victory of Iron Man, whose journey through the film is itself a substitution for suffering, and then overcoming, the anxieties registered in the US social imaginary. A sense of the US national identity is telescoped into Stark's character, and his shaken sense of confidence and insecure identity is metonymic with the more general fears saturating contemporary US culture, and as such his individual victory and restoration is also that of the US. It is significant that the drama is played out on the level of individual agency—Stark vs. Killian—rather than any sense of communal or social political agency. And it is a symbolic victory only, leaving the actual material causes of the anxieties untouched. As I'll discuss, the film is indicative of a political imagination caught within the horizon of capital, and is thus unable to do more than substitute escapist nostalgia for utopia, for an older and now-defunct 'golden age' of national capital appealed to against the ravages of the global neoliberal present.<sup>23</sup> Hand in hand with this opposition the film describes a parallel tension between a more conservative notion of the self and society against the more radical, decentred self, posited by neoliberal discourse. In fact, the film as a whole and in abstraction can be understood as positing an imaginary ideal stability and order against the intrusion of a chaotic and disruptive reality. Nothing new of course, but this chapter will look at how the film specifically shuts down the possibility for the imagination of any radical difference, under a façade of newness, and how such closure and capture of the imagination of the future operates at the level of narrative and aesthetic strategy—in particular what narrative strategies and

interaction between discourses of purity and impurity are employed to reaffirm the status quo with an apparently progressive energy and freshness, while concealing the same tired mechanisms of domination.

Finally it should be noted that, of all the texts considered over the coming chapters, *IM3* can be considered the most superficially ‘realistic’: to be precise, it is mimetic to the *fantasy life* that inheres to and sustains actually-existing capitalist reality in the Global North. Though it has technological advancements beyond the present, the world in which it is set gives the appearance of an early-21<sup>st</sup> Century USA almost to the button. Reality in *IM3* is presented as a fantastic blend of commodities, wealth and the American Dream that is precisely the (utopian) image that drives and sustains capitalism’s ideological hold, and which in this case can be equated to the self-image that the US tries to project around the globe (not-so-subtly backed, in the film and in reality, by the threat of military might). The film-world is interpenetrated with actually-existing products, from product-placement cars to soft-drinks to watches, all of which *in reality* are swaddled in the double-life of commodity wish-fulfilment and commodity fetishism, which includes, to come full circle, their fantastic history within such films (Iron Man drinks Coke!). The plot is pure fairy-tale, pure westerns with ray-guns, but the content and context of the film in a material sense, while apparently fantastical, is itself *deeply realistic in that fantasy*, in that it captures (and *is part of*) the glossy fog of capitalist reality through which subjects of capitalism must navigate every day. In this, it can be considered fundamentally a discourse of purity, in that its pretended estrangement from actual capitalist reality functions primarily to make of that reality both an appealing dream *and* an inviolable essence that cannot be thought beyond. As such, it is an appropriate place to begin the close-readings, since it is an excellent ‘control’ or ‘base-line’ candidate for a demonstration of a thoroughly ideological fantasy text and the tendency to closure discussed in the previous chapter, the techniques that are employed in the effort, and also how it fails, and registers cognitive transgressions despite itself.

## Surface Aesthetics

In grasping how the film fixes the hopes and fears of its audience upon the two principal characters, I'll begin with how it distributes its discourses of purity and impurity. The way in which this binary plays out in *Iron Man 3* is representative of just how complexly embedded within its particular socio-historical context it can be, and just how effective an analytic tool it is, but also—due to the overtly pro-status quo narrative of the film, and its Hollywood blockbuster subtlety—it provides a very clear example with which to begin.

Firstly, the names of the protagonist: Tony Stark and Aldrich Killian. 'Tony', of course, is a very ordinary US name, very guy-next-door. His surname conjures a spread of associated meanings—bare, plain, unambiguous, harsh (like a desert or an unvarnished truth), unconcealed (naked), rigid, and complete, in the sense of having reached the fullest extent or degree of something. The message is that Tony Stark *is what he appears to be*, linking him to notions of essence, which in turn implies that 'you know where you are' with him—he promises to provide a point of stability, an anchor with which we can orient ourselves. Even a name badge of his, highlighted in the film, simply has "you know who I am" written on it; a gesture of arrogance and a nod to the audience which 'knows' he is Iron Man, but also very telling in the terms we are exploiting.

Contrast 'Tony Stark' with 'Aldrich Killian': the surname speaks for itself (or rather *screams* 'bad guy'). More interesting is 'Aldrich'; it has the etymology of 'aged, old and noble ruler'. A clue perhaps to the final revelation in the film that Aldrich is in fact the Mandarin—a traditional (Chinese) enemy of Iron Man—but also the tip of a symbolic iceberg that firmly 'others' Killian from the modern world, democracy and the Enlightenment. Also, the name is aurally keyed to the adjective 'eldritch'—an archaic, horror-and-fantasy-genre favourite—meaning foreign, strange or uncanny. The audience is primed to view Aldrich as not merely an

unknown quantity but an *unknowable* one, an irruption of the unnatural that unsettles cosy notions of reality and ontology.

The division continues at the level of dress. With the exception of a flashback to a more decadent time, Stark spends most of the film in t-shirts, sweatpants and a hoodie; a no-nonsense ‘sleeves-rolled-up’ outfit appropriate for hands-on work. At the end of the film we see him in a suit that is expensive but understated—timeless, or classic, you might say. Killian, on the other hand, is rarely seen out of a suit, and they are *flashy* (one might say ‘spiv-like’)—patterns, lighter colours, more transiently fashionable—and he doesn’t wear socks, which is peculiar, reminiscent perhaps of the Wall Street yuppies of the 80’s. As foils, Stark is coded as comfortable with himself, and wears his position, his power and his wealth lightly—it *becomes* him—while Killian is the tasteless pretender, a new-money who doesn’t belong, who is performing, dressing-up, and hiding some inadequacy underneath the flash.

Notably, Killian’s appearance undergoes a dramatic shift at the beginning of the film. In a flashback, he appears as a clichéd, limping, ugly, bespectacled geek-scientist whom Stark spurns. Years later in the narrative present, he is reincarnated as a slick, handsome, business powerhouse. Such a dramatic and (initially) unaccounted shift in appearance, which draws attention to the constructed and malleable nature of representation untethered to any inherent ‘natural’, ‘essential’ or ‘true’ identity, places Killian in a distinctly postmodern space of free-floating signifiers (also the natural home of good old-fashioned con-men), where notions like morality, knowledge and truth are contingent and undependable and the valorisation of surface works to obscure the operations of power beneath. In this way the film encourages the audience to invest fear in one character, hope in the other: capricious billionaire playboy Stark is thus amusingly cast as the solid, reliable foil, as the guarantor of representational meaning and the ostensible continuer of a stable traditional identity and ontology.

The *modus operandi* of the two principals is also cut accordingly. Stark is a major public figure, giving press conferences and so on. Everyone knows he is Iron Man. At one point, (in a scene that has been roundly mocked for its improbability, but which, again, fits rather nicely into the dichotomy I'm tracing) he gives out his address to his assailants, inviting them to come to his home and get him, via a crowd of reporters. Tony Stark presents himself as forthright, upfront, and out in the open. Killian, on the other hand, is an illusionist—a master of misdirection and of orchestrating the situation to his own benefit. He fabricates a terrorist threat from the Ten Rings group, headed by someone claiming to be the legendary Mandarin, who turns out in the film to be just a drunken British stage actor named Trevor Slattery (conspicuously close to the very British 'slattern'—a dirty, untidy woman, also a 'slut' which, *mutatis mutandis*, Trevor indeed is).<sup>24</sup> Killian creates the illusion mainly through a series of staged TV messages—a nod to media manipulation, shot on set in a comedy collage of Orientalist and Middle Eastern aesthetics; curved scimitars, incense smoke, golden dragons and Ming the Merciless on wardrobe—as a front for his real plans. Killian, as I said above, is of course the real Mandarin, and can also be undertood to figure the threat of China ascendant on the global stage. What is most telling in the end is the sheer banal *familiarity* of this representation of Killian as the Mandarin—this is not the immature orientalism of Slattery, but a very recognisable and real beast—capital, resurgent under the sign of the dragon.

There is here a conflict between notions of stability, tradition, and essence on the one hand, and change, contingency, and constructed nature on the other, arranged around the two principals. The sense is of something extant, good and right, being challenged by something new and evil that threatens to destroy it: the age-old fear of the Other. One of the privileged sources of the contradictions represented is the tension between a more conservative notion of the self and society against that posited by neoliberal discourse. As Lemke outlines:



Whereas in the classic liberal conception, *homo economicus* forms an external limit and the inviolable core of governmental action, in the neo-liberal thought of the Chicago School he becomes a behaviouristically manipulable being and the correlative of a governmentality which systematically changes the variables of the ‘environment’ and can count on the ‘rational choice’ of the individuals (200)

The contingency of character we find in Killian, contrasting and threatening to make redundant the closed stability of Stark; Killian’s entrepreneurial spirit; the way sees the human as a “a flexible bundle of skills” to be developed (Gershon 537), right down to the genetic level,<sup>25</sup> and finally his manipulation of situations to his own advantage is all a nod to the neoliberal understanding of subjectivity as contingent upon a constructed context, with a hint of disaster capitalism as a valid ‘market-opening’ strategy in his terrorist ruse, and willingness to attack Stark Industries as the competition. In this film it is neoliberalism, and the concomitant changes in global socio-economic reality, the assault on traditional notions of subjectivity and traditional social relations that is animated as the transgressive force. The technology of the protagonists, the modes of capital they connote, and their historical pedigree all contribute to the weight of this symbolic framework.

### **Technology is as Technology does**

Stark refers to himself more than once in *IM3* as ‘just a mechanic’—adding to the regular-Joe image cultivated around this billionaire genius. Presented as such, Stark’s technology borrows the connotations of honest, good-old-fashioned machinery; you can pop the hood and tinker with it. This technology is, crucially, separate from the human body (with a couple of interesting exceptions, discussed below). He makes suits that enhance him and protect him, even do his bidding, but they are not seen as changing his essential nature. Through J.A.R.V.I.S., his

computer AI, Stark interacts with technology, but remains apart. He remains above all else a symbolically ‘natural’ human being, who merely ‘uses’ technology when he needs to.

As well as being merely an object to be used, the Iron Man technology, though ‘futuristic’, has clear limitations within *IM3*—batteries run out, prototypes malfunction, the suits are easily destroyed – the machines *cannot do anything and everything*, they must obey some laws (obviously imposed by the narrative rather than ‘science’, but still). The most basic law is conservation of energy: the suits run out of energy, they don’t have infinite capacity for action. This finitude of potential is very important. One of the key qualitative differences that distinguish purity from impurity in Douglas’ framework is that the latter is theoretically infinite in capacity and potential, and hence unknowable, while purity is finite in capacity and scope, and represents the very act of ‘knowing’ and thus ordering. This technology that runs out of battery and breaks at the first blow in *IM3* is the same technology (more advanced if anything) that stood up to gods and defeated whole alien battalions in Joss Wheedon’s contemporaneous *The Avengers* (2012). This apparent finitude of the Iron Man technology in *IM3* is thus an ideological ruse.<sup>26</sup> The frailty of it is there to make it appear knowable and comprehensible. It is a product of science: it is to be trusted because it has limits and obeys laws, and this positions it within the ideological constellation of purity, of ‘good’, of rationality and the status quo. Or at least, it does when presented alongside its foil—Extremis.

Killian’s genetic Extremis technology is the conceptual opposite of Stark’s. It is firstly *invasive*—it is not something that you pick up, use, and discard, but something that changes the ‘essence’ of the user at the molecular level—witness Killian’s dramatic change of appearance and attitude. The clear resonance here is with the advances in bio-engineering and genetic programming; an appropriate connotation when we consider the media hysteria, moral quagmires and category-confusions thrown up by the developing technologies Zizek has named one of the ‘four horsemen’ that will lead to the fall of the current capitalist system.<sup>27</sup> Further, the

serum grants powers to its users that seem to follow no ‘natural’ or scientific logic, but rather a magical one, and which appear to have no real limits. Bodies heal themselves, regenerate limbs, bounce back from increasingly terminal situations like they were the undead; they have super-strength (they are stronger than Iron Man); and at one point, Killian even breathes fire (“you can breathe fire?!” exclaims Rhodes disbelievingly).<sup>28</sup> The seeming limitlessness of the powers endowed, the way they manifest when the narrative demands it, and their invisible source *inside* the body, makes this technology cognate with sorcery and magic rather than technology and science, with the irrational and mysterious rather than the rational and knowable: impurity rather than purity. Extremis seems to allow its users to transcend the limits of material reality. This conceptual status is borne out by the aesthetics of Extremis: it’s coded as unclean, impure. It manifests as a kind of roiling lava under the skin of the users, echoing a demonic hell-fire appearance with all of the associated cognates for a Western audience – from the devil to evil witches and sorcerers to primitive and terrible fire-worship.<sup>29</sup> It traditionally stands as the representation of a powerful, inhuman and malignant agency, and in *Iron Man 3* it conjures the apparent uncertainty and threat to US society posed by all that Killian symbolises.

The obvious thing to note at this point is that the ‘rational’, finite nature of Stark’s Iron Man, and the ‘irrational’, unknowable status of Killian’s Extremis, are both *narrative constructs*. Generic distinctions are important here: within the technological dominant structuring the science fiction genre, anything with the appearance of sorcery is coded as impure, and collocated with pre-modern discourses. While clearly manifest in the discourses that are used to structure and separate sf from fantasy (see Jameson, *Archaeologies* 57-71), this self-definition through abjection stretches back and out to the self-image of Enlightenment rationality (for which ‘magic’ is obfuscation, trickery and wrong-thinking); of organised religions (for which ‘magic’ is heathenish and sinful); of modernity as such (for which ‘magic’ is primitive and stupid). In the horrific shape of witch-hunts, accusations of magic apportioned blame for social crises and the

breakdown of traditional cultures, and it has acted as placeholder for racist attitudes, in real life and in fiction.<sup>30</sup> Further, ethnographic accounts of societies where magic remains a part of lived experience show that it is often used to explain and cast judgment on the actions of someone who has, for example, seized too much power for themselves, or, more grandly perhaps, by indigenous communities to describe the experience of coming into relation with the global capitalist marketplace.<sup>31</sup> In *IM3*, a contemporary iteration of this longstanding tension between dominant social order and its demonised and magical other is captured in the opposition of Stark and Killian. Indeed, this opposition, overlapping with the clarity of the purity/impurity opposition, is one of the clear markers of the extreme ideological saturation of the film—and in turn, the complicating (and collapsing) of these binaries is one of the key points of interest, suggestive of its radical potential, in the post-generic fantastic to be discussed in later chapters. However, to better understand the specificity of this particular manifestation of these binaries in *IM3*, and to anchor Killian more securely to yet another contemporary source of social and economic instability in the US—financial and speculative capital—it's now worth taking a little trip down US social-memory lane.

## **The Magical Underbelly of the American Dream**

*Speculation is the negative expression of the irrationality of capitalistic reason.*  
—Theodor Adorno, *Letter to Walter Benjamin*

Almost since its inception, the United States of America has harboured and promoted a notion of itself as the Land of Opportunity. The cliché runs: if you work hard, then you will improve your lot in life, and that of your children, because the USA is a meritocracy. It's a place that shucked off the traditional hierarchies of Old Europe, and gave people space to make something of themselves. This ideology, contrary to its ostensible meritocracy, in fact provides a happy justification for a status quo of economic inequality and a wealthy ruling elite, in so far as it forms

a closed logical circle—the deserving are wealthy and the wealthy deserve it—but, being nothing more than an ideology—an interpretation of the world—it begins to strain at the seams when confronted with reality. While there was the dominant idea from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century on that “only plodding diligence brought lasting success” (Lears 58), undermining this were two divergent socio-economic mechanisms. The first was the very real accumulation of wealth through inheritance and the consequent reproduction of an elite through unfair advantages of birth. This entrenched hierarchy of wealth—of the status quo—is one of the major elements that gives the lie to Tony Stark as hero, and is as such one of the key material realities the film must neutralise in its effort to square the ideological circle—somehow this silver-spooned child must be given the aura of one who has worked for their wealth, maintaining the ideal of a fluid and rewarding social structure. The second mechanism was provided by the notion of the ‘lucky hit’, the overnight success from the stock-market or real-estate speculation. This latter provides a more serious challenge to the ideology underpinning the status quo. As Jackson Lears notes

The tension between dreams of excess and methodical self-control (whether under religious or scientific auspices) embodied a conflict between two overlapping but distinct versions of economic development: speculative expansion on the one hand, systematic organization on the other. (33)

If success was the mark of worth, then success was all that mattered – not the plodding diligence, and not the hard work. The US in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was torn between the ideological valorisation of “moralistic or managerial strategies of control” and an underbelly of “dreams of magical transformation” (Lears 41): there were “emerging pattern of tensions in commercial culture: between control and release, stability and sorcery” (43), where people, “caught between their own experience of scarcity and the achievement ethos of a developing entrepreneurial society

[...] sought economic self-transformation through collaboration with supernatural powers” (44). These promises of transformation were inherent from the beginning in the promise of speculative capital, commodities, and those that sold them, and persists to this day: Killian can best be viewed as the inheritor of this threatening and destabilising underbelly that deals in dreams and desires—destabilising, it must be noted, to the precise *content* of the status quo—who is rich and powerful, who is not—and not to the more foundational *form* of capitalist society which requires the purposeful excitement of such dreams and desires (excited but channelled into labour and profit) in order to function.

### **Snake-Oil Salesmen**

Much like Benjamin’s ‘dialectical image’—grasped in a flash, and binding past and present together in a single juxtaposition, reanimating that past rather than dissecting it in an autopsy of description—Killian’s appearance concretises the symbolism of impurity with culturally and historically specific resonances in the past. The suit he favours in the film—a cheeky checked plaid number—pared with his rings, large flashy watch and bleached, swept-back hair, is striking for its appropriateness to the character, particularly as it contrasts with Stark. Killian’s appearance telescopes over a hundred years of US cultural memory into his character, reminding the audience of iterations of a US archetype—the patent-medicine man, the snake-oil salesman, the confidence trickster, the second-hand car salesman and the risky sorcery of financiers.<sup>32</sup>

All of these characters carry connotations of trickery, of promises and hope, of dreams of personal transformation – often through consumption – and their products are always the ones that badly need dreams and evoked desires to sell them, because they range from untrustworthy to worthless, and are essentially ways of trading in belief more than material goods. Placing Killian in their lineage reveals him as a man who deals in desire, in the insubstantial world of dreams, in magical self-transformation, in Ponzi schemes that can surely never be honoured. Nor

is he dealer only, but beneficiary of sorcery: his own metamorphosis (from geek to chic, shall we say) bears all the mystery and evokes all the suspicion of the unearned overnight success, the speculators that produce nothing and appear to conjure vast success from thin air.<sup>33</sup> These characters and their dealings do not sit easily within an ideology of rationality and meritocracy; they take the part of the ineffable and the dangerous, as magic and impurity always do. They stir up an ontological and epistemological instability that always underlies and threatens the stability of the everyday social order, by its easy dissolution of apparently hard and fast categories, its joyful ignorance of propriety,<sup>34</sup> and its visible rebuke to the ostensible ‘truth’ and completeness of an ideology.<sup>35</sup>

Killian thus reanimates an historical chain, overdetermined by evocations of the magical side of capitalism—of desire, consumption, fetishism, speculation, transformation—structured in sharp relief against Stark, whose aesthetic and symbolic qualities of purity resolve into a contrasting image of idealised US capitalism as stable, rational, organised and productive. We are presented, through the othering of Killian, with Good (idealised / nostalgic / productive / national) Capital and Bad (neoliberal / financial / immaterial / foreign) Capital: here the limitations of the film’s imaginary horizons and the nostalgia of its utopian impulse are made plain. The horizon of the film is quite explicitly bounded by the horizon of capital, its key narrative agents are puppets of capital, and its hope is one of impossible return to an ideal that never really existed, though today it may appear a golden age of morality, economic fairness and US prosperity. With Stark discursively constructed within the film as telescoping an essential US identity, Killian is set up as threatening to destroy that essence. Or at the least change it, which, for an essence, is tantamount to the same thing. What is telling of the film’s ideological limits, however, is that Killian’s ‘evil’ goal is to become rich through obtaining national defence contracts for his company. To this end he has managed to get a hold over the Vice-President, and plans to kill the President, giving his man the right to make the decision. The threat is that

the government would become the ‘puppet’ of capital, but what is occluded in this narrative is that government is *already* in thrall to capital, as perfectly captured in the scene where Killian and Stark fight over the trussed up and useless president (incidentally wearing an Iron Man suit). Thus the threat really lacks teeth from this perspective. Especially given that in previous Iron Man films, the attitude towards the government is like something out of Ayn Rand—representatives of government are shown as stupid, ugly, arrogant, or just completely ineffectual, and at one point in *Iron Man 2*, Stark walks out on a Congressional hearing, flippantly remarking that with Iron Man he has ‘privatised peace’. The regular Joe, Fordist Tony Stark of *IM3* is a thin veneer that fails to conceal the neoliberal beneath. The Iron Man films do not care for government, they care for capital. The fear that is truly being manifest in the tussle over the President in *Iron Man 3* is that the US government will become the puppet of *foreign* capital, the US will become in thrall to *foreign* influence—reflective in part, perhaps, of the fact that China is the largest foreign owner of the rapidly expanding US debt.<sup>36</sup> Either way, it is a nonsense and purely ideological distinction along the lines of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ capital—the US government is *already* the puppet of ‘foreign’ capital, as are all governments, and capital is fundamentally foreign to the qualitative good of humanity as such. So while the film dramatises an allegedly crucial threat to the ‘purity’ and identity of the US, capital remains the unquestioned bedrock and motive of both sides.

## **Nostalgia & The Status Quo**

I noted earlier that a conservative bias was built in to our adherence to purity—as time passes we become more and more invested in our particular understanding of reality (Douglas 37, also Bauman). Add to this the Lacanian insight that symbolic orders are *always* constructed on the exclusion of a demonised element, and a powerful symbiosis emerges between an antagonistic attitude to the impure other, and a nostalgic, conservative utopian hope that seeks to preserve the



‘purity’ characterised by the status quo. Such a commitment to preservation in the face of danger necessarily robs us of our potential to imagine alternative futures, since change is precisely the thing triggering alarm: in the face of the 2008 economic crisis, it is perhaps no wonder imagination failed.<sup>37</sup> *IM3* demonstrates a clear consciousness that the capitalist status quo is flawed and unstable, and equally that the coming future—the further encroachment and intensification of global neoliberalism, finance capital, and so on, despite its catastrophic failures—is terrifying (Killian), and yet, at this present moment, *that is the only future imaginable*, so the narrative of the film retreats into the comfort of a nostalgic past (Stark). It is sheer conservatism and protection of privilege that we see in *IM3*, and what the heroics of Tony Stark accomplish is simultaneously a reassuring but merely symbolic victory against the inexorable onrush of this future, and the imaginary negation of any possibility of radical change.

Stark is not the most obvious avatar of nostalgia and conservatism perhaps, but consider his trade—a mechanic, according to him—who crafts a series of Iron Man suits. With the swift and continuing collapse of the US manufacturing sector since the 1980s, and the dwindling of ‘hands on’ work, this vision of a futuristic small cottage manufacturer is highly nostalgic under all the hi-tech pageantry. Much like a traditional producer, neither is he alienated from the products of his labour: he is, after all, making *himself* in some sense, over and over again, and only gives the suits to others under extreme duress. Contrast this to Killian: he doesn’t *make* anything as such (Extremis is developed, in the film universe, by Dr Maya Hansen), and what he peddles—true to type—is symbolic or magical transformation; a nod perhaps to the shift in the US to immaterial labour, that of producing “immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response” (Hardt & Negri 108), alongside the growing malaise in domestic American manufacturing and exporting of consumer goods and machine technology.<sup>38</sup> The identification of Killian with China as ascendant global capitalist state would provide further utopian weight to Stark’s nostalgic embodiment of the US as a

manufacturing power. That Killian is the bad guy suggests that the ideological image presented of and to the US in *IM3* is ultimately one springing from an idealised Fordist era, that is uncomfortable with the already-achieved ‘future’ of the present, let alone anything further removed.<sup>39</sup>

The nostalgic working-man image of Stark is, as I noted earlier, perhaps a little spoiled by his wealthy heritage, so the film introduces Harley, a precocious 10 year-old boy with a gift for engineering, who meets Stark when he is soul-searching and in whom Stark recognises a younger self. In Harley, the film gives us what Stark alone cannot—a genuine American Dream. And just as we know Harley will become a great success like Stark (through perseverance, not a lucky hit), we elide young Stark with Harley, which is the ideological moment at work; Stark did not struggle, or improve his lot in life, but rather has maintained the silver spoon’s position where he found it. Contrast this fairy-tale symbolic elision—where Stark is given an imaginary success-through-struggle past, and Harley an imaginary success-through-struggle future, but there being no actual social mobility—with the way the film treats the only actual change in social position that it contains: Killian. Here is the conservative ideology of ‘quality not equality’—purporting to enjoin social equality, but in practise simply reinforcing the extant hierarchies. Contrast Killian with Harley: the latter apparently working class and with no father, ingenious and passionate. While Killian’s ambition threatens to destabilise the status quo, Harley stands in at this level of interpretation for a working class who are talented, capable people, but who need the father figure of Stark’s capitalist aristocracy, not only to look up to, as they should, but also—symbolised by Stark’s closing gift of a kitted-out workshop for Harley—to provide them with the means of production and, likely, channel them into a job at Stark Industries in later life. One is good and the other evil ultimately because one can be integrated and the other (superficially) refuses to be.

Turning back to the technology, we can discern further layers of nostalgia and conservatism both in the way the film depicts Stark's relationship to his creations and in the nature of the Iron Man technology itself. Despite Stark's apparent ingenuity with and commitment to advanced technology, the film is shot through with warnings over the danger of technology and a concomitant desire on the part of Stark to 'return to nature'. We have already noted the binary oppositions that symbolically locate the Iron Man tech as fundamentally 'exterior' to the human, and as a 'tool' to be used. This binary is complicated within the film, but these complications serve only to reinforce the basal dichotomy. The two key complications are, firstly, that Stark installs sub-dermal controls for the Iron Man suit that are wired to his brain, so he can command the suit to an extent by thought alone. Secondly, that at the very beginning of all his adventures (*Iron Man 1* in movie terms) he was forced to install a small arc-reactor in his chest, which both keeps the shrapnel lodged there from burrowing into his heart, and serves as the energy-pack for the running of the suits. Both of these technologies are inescapably more towards the 'cyborg' end of things, creating a new subject rather than user and tool, and as such are closer to the 'invasive' technology of Killian. The binary is maintained however, since the film treats these invasive aspects of Stark's technology as impurities to be expunged—to take them in order:

Firstly, the sub-dermal controls. In a key scene in the film, already mentioned, Stark is asleep in bed with Pepper Potts, his wife and CEO of Stark Industries. Stark is having a nightmare, probably connected to his experiences in the *Avengers* movie. His distress is communicated to the Iron Man suit through the implanted link, and it comes into the bedroom, grabbing Pepper Potts by the throat, presumably identifying her as the threat. Stark wakes, and deactivates the suit. This episode is telling: technology is framed here as being something more intimately bound up with humanity, interacting with it on an affective level rather than just as an

external product of conscious rationality and the tool of rational intention, and the result is almost disastrous.

Secondly, the arc-reactor: very much in keeping with the construction of Stark as ‘natural’ human, the film closes with Stark actually removing the shrapnel in his chest, and the arc-reactor, thereby returning him to full ‘natural’ status. This gesture of returning to nature is accompanied by Stark’s realisation that he will ‘always be Iron Man’—which is to say that, over the course of the film, Stark and the manifestation of his power and potential (Iron Man) become completely identified with each other—naturalising both into a self-identical essence of ontological significance, which allows the defeat of Killian and the revalorisation of the idealised status quo. Before I explore this further, a quick digression is necessary to contrast the implications of the contrasting technologies—Iron Man and Extremis—in terms of the social relations and modes of futurity they suggest.

### **Iron Man, same as he ever was**

It seems counter-intuitive to call the futuristic Iron Man technology conservative, but it is on the horizon that matters—that of social relations, and engagement with the Other. It is a manifestation of extreme solipsistic individualism—a second skin that magnifies that individual’s power and influence across space/time. Stark—the greatest technological genius the world has ever known—spends all his time churning out iteration after reiteration of the same product. The Iron Man suit appears an incredibly flexible tool; it stands, as all technology does, between humanity and the world it wishes to interact with, and allows for the vast expansion of human agency—in granting the ability to operate in extreme environments, including space, and in the ability to manipulate the material world. But, as we have seen, it leaves the notion of ‘the human’ unchanged. So what you get is the vast expansion of the same—an enframing of the world, as Heidegger would have put it—a colonising of the future, of space and time, with an endless

present, and as such the negation of any image of the possibility of radical social change. The Iron Man suits are an extreme literalised metaphor of this colonisation of the future by the present. They completely cover the individual, mediating between them and the world in every respect, ensuring that the world bends to the will of the (powerful, elite) individual without necessitating any change on the part of the individual. There is no compromise with the Iron Man suit—it is an exaggeration of power to the point where engagement or understanding with others become unnecessary as force, directly wielded by the isolated individual, will serve the purpose. Within the suit, Stark is safe from outside influences, and can exert his will upon them in return.<sup>40</sup> Wherever Stark goes, whatever new worlds his suit gives him access to, he will always carry himself, eternally the same, from place to place. There is no real expansion of horizon here, not in the radical sense of engagement with an Other, but instead there is the reduction of all possible horizons to his own, and by extension, to the world of US capital he represents. As such, Iron Man represents a notion of futurity elaborated only within and in repetition of the structures of the neoliberal present—the extension of the present into the future again conceptually grounding the possibilities of the present as the only ones available.

## **Breaking the Horizons of Capital**

*To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and our world—and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.*

—Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*

Extremis, like any technology, is Janus-faced. But in *IM3* newness is, against all appearances, not tolerated. Capitalism is often feted for its power to drive innovation, but the profit-motive and the established economic hierarchies of capital are stunting development that does not serve its

needs, particularly in countries furthest down the path of financialisation of the economy and dematerialisation of labour. All but the most destructive of areas – those of power, violence and short-term profit, are suffering, while even something as apparently unambiguously good as the field of healthcare becomes distorted into sites of extreme inequality of access, the inhumanity of subjecting the health of a loved one to cost-benefit analysis, and the myriad crimes of big pharma. Extremis, on the other hand, promises so much. It rewrites the human genome, meaning that – unlike the Iron Man – it allows change of the most fundamental type. Here, in the most impure and fantastical element of the film is a glimpse of transgressive possibilities that threaten to shatter the status quo—a figure for radical subjectivities and alternative social configurations. Alas, the only application it is given, to the eternal justification of Iron Man and the status quo, is that of creating fire-breathing super-soldiers. It is given this application precisely because the transgressive possibilities are so thoroughly quarantined that as soon as it emerges into the text it is made into a tool for chasing profit, and the greatest profit (following directly in Stark’s footsteps) comes from military applications, the precise military-industrial complex that Stark represents, and which he is defending through his actions. In a classic dialectic of power and resistance, Stark *creates* Killian; and Stark *needs* Killian as he is—Killian could use Extremis for any number of applications, to create any number of things which would render Stark’s opposition either impotent or unnecessary.

Extremis is capable of curing all disease, for example, of improving humanity’s capabilities in any field, of making us fit to exist in any environment. It is Iron Man, but without the suit, without the false notion of an essential human nature. And its use—its proper use—demands a transgressive shift, towards an acceptance of *difference* that is tantamount to releasing the concept of ‘humanity’ from its physical bonds, and so freeing it of any stable meaning that relies on a particular physiognomy. Doing so would be a universalising gesture, demolishing the barriers of belonging based on physicality—through exponential variety, the Multiplicity

approaches the One. The kind of physical freedom thus engendered would also allow something like the vast range of consciousness types, in the vast range of bodies suited for purpose, in Justina Robson's *Natural History*, for example, where the bodies of humanity are as flexible as its imagination and its needs demand.<sup>41</sup> In this universalising gesture—this cognitive gesture, this forward-looking gesture—the properly utopian element of the film dwells.

### **America's Recuperation of Confidence**

To return now to the question posed above: given that the energy and newness in the film resides with the impure villain, and the technology of Extremis, how does the film perform its conservative manoeuvre of reinstating a nostalgic status quo *in a way that makes that status quo appear as the truly energetic element of the film*? I would argue that this is performed through an operation that Michael Taussig has called *defacement* (*Defacement*): the Iron Man suit stands as a totemic image of American capital, individualism and military might, but in *IM3*, this sacred image is *defaced*. The superior technology fails repeatedly in the film—uncharacteristically so, as we noted at the beginning—running out of energy, breaking repeatedly and so on.<sup>42</sup> The posters for the film also highlighted this trope: showing variously Tony Stark in a worse-for-wear Iron Man suit with—significantly—the mask removed, exposing his injured face; or Pepper Potts holding a severed Iron Man helmet. The focus on the faltering image of Iron Man, the exposure of the face, and the man inside the can, runs throughout the film, in tandem with the story-thread that Stark is experiencing some version of post-traumatic stress after his (notably *irrational/magical*) experiences with aliens and gods in the previous *Avengers* movie.

So in contrast to the outward 'stable' image that Stark and Iron Man are coded as presenting, Stark spends the film insecure about himself, and about his place in this new universe of unpredictable and novel powers: "ever since the guy with the hammer fell out of the sky, subtlety kind of went out of the window" as Killian states. The whole film is wound through by

the undercurrent that Stark is trying to ‘find out who he is’—he has panic attacks, and feels vulnerable and frightened when outside the suits. Indeed, it is significant for our analysis that donning the raiment of war only temporarily assuages this new fear and vulnerability of Stark’s, and that a permanent solution only comes from turning, confronting and revalorising the self; rediscovering the essence, we might say. So we have this tension, of a character—symbolic of the US—that represents something knowable and comforting and stable, and yet is experiencing a crisis of identity. This crisis is presented in part, and can be understood as, a loss of *home*, where home is to be understood as part of the metonymic and telescoping chain of essence and identity that runs from Stark through the Iron Man suit, through his home, all the way up to the USA itself. This loss is clearly and materially manifest on a grand scale by the scene in which Stark’s house is wrecked, and crumbles into the ocean, which is the same point in the narrative that Stark also loses connection with that other potent symbol of home, his wife, Pepper Potts. There are rumblings of this disconnection prior to this scene, in the way that Stark appears to be estranged from his wife due to his trauma, spending all his time in the high-tech garage rather than the house and giving her a thoughtless gift. During the attack on his house, Stark throws his Iron Man suit over Potts, marking the use of his agency as ultimately *in defence of his home* (his own identity, his home, the nation itself, all are represented *and* defended by the Iron Man suit) and, at the end, the reuniting of Stark with Potts marks Killian’s defeat.<sup>43</sup> As noted, the notion of home in this film collapses a number of distinct levels of ‘belonging’ into each other—telescoping into Stark’s relationship with Potts and Stark’s actual home the more symbolic relationship of Stark to a particular ideological notion of the USA and a specific form of capitalist economy. Thus through Stark’s trauma, loss and crisis of identity, and then his victorious regaining of what was lost, is played out a narrative of national trauma, loss and crisis (not 9/11 this time, but the economic collapse, and the loss of faith in the power of a capitalist US), and the resolution of those real crises, but only on the symbolic level of the narrative. This disconnection between the



stable and secure image represented by Stark and his home, and the rather disturbed self-image of Stark himself in the film is the dislocation that allows the apparent threatening of the status quo, followed by its victorious reinstatement, and which allows the reinstatement to appear energetic and creative, rather than ossifying. In this way the disruptive energy of Killian is captured by Stark and channelled back into a soothing sense of the status quo being restored despite the fact that, as discussed earlier, the image of that status quo is ultimately an idealistic façade concealing both a systemic reproduction of inequality and its own contemporary impossibility.<sup>44</sup> This requires unpacking.

The act of demasking, of *defacing*, appears to threaten the thing being demasked, but, as Taussig demonstrates, instead strengthens it, pushes it back from the plane of the visible to that of the invisible, (of source, ontology, essence). One of Taussig's clearest examples is of a young boy undergoing a tribal rite of passage. He is physically tormented by the demons of the tribe, culminating in a ritual – conducted within the community's inner sanctum – where it is revealed to the boy that the demons are only his elders in masks. It would appear that this exposing of the human, artificial nature of the spirits would call the entirety of the culture and their cosmogony/ideology (much the same thing) into question. But it does not, because the boy is told that of course the spirits he saw were fake, because real spirits belong to a wholly more fundamental (ontological) order of existence, and it was the spirits who taught the men their skills, and instructed them to make the masks, to represent them on this mundane, visible plane of existence. The act of defacement thus releases an energy of possibility and creativity in its initial threat to throw the boy's understanding of reality wide open (if tradition is not True, then the responsibility for deciding truth and action must be shouldered moment to moment by the creative individual), before reclaiming that energy, reknitting the pattern of the status quo, and driving the foundation of it down into unassailable ontology and essence (the unseen/unknowable spirits which produced the seen/knowable culture, and, not being material,

can never be assailed). This is precisely the way the film manipulates our impression of Tony Stark: the previously unassailable Iron Man (what shiny symbol of power and purity!) is defaced, providing the opportunity for Stark to embark on a fairly clichéd journey of self-rediscovery, and crucially allowing us (and him) to recall the true potential that created that metal shell, the source of the creative labour, the essence of which it is merely a manifestation—Tony Stark. Such journeys also clearly resonate with notions of traditional rites of passage, and again the journey begins and ends in the same place, with the reinstatement and preservation of the status quo.

The invisible, the unrepresentable—potential, power, creativity, essence—is presented through the defacement of its sign—in this case Iron Man—and the sacred energy thus released, which must be knitted up again, through the act of creativity, of establishing social relations anew, under a new (or, as is usually the case, the old) sign. This defacement, the temporary sense of liminal instability, and the subsequent restoration of the idealised order lends vitality to that established, fixed thing, making it seem alive and relevant once more. What is being demasked here? A great deal: the notion of Iron Man's invincibility, and through that, the notion of technology's limitless power and superiority, and the all-conquering military, productive and capital might of the USA. The USA (and Stark, and his home, his loved ones) stand or fall in this film with the symbol of Iron Man. Stark does not really believe in Iron Man anymore (as the US grows insecure of its own global might) which is why he keeps returning—death-drive-like—to the creation of new suits, none of which will satisfy his lack of belief in himself. The film dramatises the defacing or stripping away of that technological mask, revealing in the process the vital source and value of that technology, that is the human, and human potential for creative action specifically. Once this is acknowledged, the energy released as Stark falls back on his own essential potential and ingenuity—he must *create*—can be knitted back up into the same pattern as before, with the symbolic restoration of the idealised status quo, everyone happy, threat defeated, and so on. Note that Killian is an impure, dangerous avatar of socially undomesticated

potential. To defeat Killian, and to perform the victory of one social pattern over another, Stark has to tap into his own potential. Stark defeats Killian by rehearsing once again his capabilities – he doesn't do anything new to defeat Killian, but must in fact *become more himself than he was before*. This is the key conservative message of the film. It throws, in our reading, the whole system of capital and military technology back onto the generative powers of the individual—in this case Tony Stark—reminding you in classic Marxist fashion where all that came from, that it is merely produced, and that the real power lies prior to the product, in the producing. And at the same time, by so doing, it conceals the real status quo behind an idealised projection of itself, the actual encroachment of neoliberalism and financial capital and the loss of solo superpower status all hidden behind the pretence that America is still the young, vigorous, productive nation it once was. Finally, it naturalises the choices made by Stark, in that when he is forced to be creative and innovative, he actually does the same thing again, suggesting both that Stark and the type of US he stands for in the film represents the only conceivable choice, *and* illustrating again the limited and deterministic paucity of imagination in response to the crisis facing the US.

This pretence even penetrates the geography of the film as Stark—defaced, house destroyed, suit empty—finds himself, at the beginning of his redemptive journey, in Tennessee. As a sunbelt state, it has been one of the recipients of the flight of productive capital from the old 'rust belt' industrial regions of the north-east US, and is actually one of the few places in the contemporary US which is experiencing a growth in manufacturing, particularly the automobile industry (Selko 2012; Koba 2013). But even this apparent validation of the nostalgic possibility that Stark represents is undercut by the socio-economic reality: Tennessee is attractive to manufacturing because of its cheaper—and non-union—labour, less expensive land and business tax breaks, amongst other incentives, which must be maintained to remain attractive to the car manufacturers (mostly non-US in the first place) who have operations in the state (see The

Brookings Institution). To remain competitive in a global market, profit must come first, people second.

Finally, in the climactic battle with the employment of Iron Legion (i.e. *all* the suits, controlled by AI), we have the power of Iron Man expanding much further. Stark's capability to exert influence expanding much further across space and time, into autonomous units (drones! and battling on an oil platform no less—the film is nothing if not topical), presents a greater demonstration of technological power than ever before. So the faith in Stark, in technology, in military might and in the status quo is stripped away through defacement, only to be renewed in grander style. Significantly, this final battle also causes the surplus hoard of Iron Man suits to be completely destroyed (consumed), thus clearing the path for further production by Stark, and (idealised) business as usual.

## **A Different Value**

There is one final point to make concerning Stark as nostalgic symbol of a better US: if he is to truly capture the utopian longings of the audience, he needs to be seen to embody social values that are ultimately irreducible, even antithetical, to the quantitative rationale of capital, otherwise his struggle against Killian is too clearly one conducted between two types of the same thing. This is where Stark's wife, Pepper Potts, comes into the picture. At the beginning of the film Stark gives Potts a Christmas present—a 2-meter-tall toy rabbit. This is a truly 'valueless' gift; a bloated commodified caricature of 'love' that signifies only monetary expense and lacks any personal thought or content—unlike the 'gifts' theorised by anthropologists from Marcel Mauss to David Graeber, it does not carry with it any essence of the giver.<sup>45</sup> Potts is suitably unimpressed, and this disconnect in their relationship is very much a part of the general disconnect Stark overcomes during the film. This reading is strengthened by the revelation that Killian and Potts have a history, and after she meets the new, improved Killian, we see her

looking ambiguously, wistfully even, after him as he walks away. Then Stark loses her completely, as Killian kidnaps her, and forces her to undergo the Extremis procedure, symbolically assimilating Potts to himself. It is precisely at this point that Stark is forced to recognise Potts as a genuine Other—an individual independent of himself, whom he loves and depends upon, and is in danger of losing.

The significance of Pepper Potts goes much deeper than this. In the film she is the CEO of Stark Industries, promoted by Stark to run his company while he immerses himself in building the Iron Man suits. While she is thus in a sense a professional and public figure, she nonetheless remains within the narrative of the film in the traditional structural role of housewife: while she does all the behind-the-scenes work of producing the value that allows Stark to do what he wants to do, Stark remains the one who realises this value in his highly public displays of heroism as Iron Man.<sup>46</sup> Thus the loss of Potts is both the loss of Stark's connection to social values of love, family, community, and so on, and the loss of that which, behind the scenes, helps to make him what he is. This can be contrasted to Killian who, after taking over the Extremis serum produced by Dr Maya Hansen, kills her. His separation from 'humanity' is complete, and his downfall follows soon after.

In the climactic battle, all these threads come together. Stark finds himself unable to defeat Killian, even with the Iron Legion. An Extremis-enhanced Potts steps in. Stark needs her to defeat Killian. Significantly, because of her condition, one of the Iron Man drones targets her, Stark is unable to stop it, and she destroys it, bringing it down in front of Stark. Then, donning the arm of the suit, she dispatches Killian. This is Potts as Other, as independent and strong woman, yet her actions are still coded with the attitude of a ticked-off wife, taking her anger out on a symbolic substitute for Stark (the suit). The instant after she strikes Killian down, she turns to Stark, and seems to physically shrink and collapse back into her previous domesticated role, saying only "Oh my God. That was really violent" in a bewildered voice. Her return to Stark,

and the final victorious moment in which Stark demonstrates his apparent embodiment of values antithetical to those of capital—love, family, sacrifice and so on—and the crucial restoration of his *home*, comes when they embrace as the Iron Legion soar and explode behind them on Stark's orders, in a grand fireworks display. This grand destruction is Stark's gift to Potts, truly giving up a part of himself for her. However, even this is ambiguous, and his gesture should be read as reminiscent of the infamous *potlatch*, where the giving of grand gifts, so grand that they were impossible to return (imagine the monetary value of those suits! Imagine the time spent on them!), ensured the giver dominance over the receiver.<sup>47</sup> This gesture, and the subsequent 'curing' of Potts and Stark's own 'return to nature' in his removal of the chest arc-reactor, ties Stark and his victory to the successful reaffirmation of an idealised status quo through its metonymy with Stark's regaining his wife and home, re-establishing the security of essence and identity, for himself and the nation. The human narrative allows the larger socio-economic one to be played out affectively, surreptitiously, and connects the latter to the utopian desires of the audience.

### **Conclusion: Beyond the Horizon of Capital**

The film performs its ideological closure through pitting a demonised and impure antagonist, overdetermined by the fears that plague the contemporary US, against an idealised nostalgic and pure status quo. The threat of the former allows the symbolic defacement of the latter, and the subsequent reknitting of the social energies released back into their previous pattern, producing the sensation of an idealised order restored. This provides the catharsis. But Killian can then also be understood to be a distorted version of a popular anger, cast as evil within the dominant ideological framing of the movie. Killian is not only a vehicle for catharsis, and a buried utopian figure as described, but he is a vehicle of chastisement as well—casting unruly neoliberal dreams of transformation as evil and destructive against a longed-for sense of social cohesion and

stability—the eternal yearning of modernity and before. But beneath the obvious stance of the film, that very destruction can be understood to take its power from a genuine utopian urge to destroy the system that oppresses. Yet the film contains its antagonists firmly within the horizons of capital, and the idealised order restored is just harking back to an imaginary golden age—one that simply cannot exist now, and that, if no genuine political alternative is presented, must give way completely to neoliberalism, financialisation and the vicissitudes of the global future.

Iron Man, as individualist, solipsistic creator, capitalist titan and self-made superhero, is the *mise-en-abyme* of this self-preservation and extending reiteration of the status quo; a redoubled, distilled concentrate. To close this chapter, I'd like to note an intriguing alternative to Iron Man, one that inverts the usual purity/impurity binary by embracing the aesthetic of impurity as a more egalitarian mode, rather than as a threat. The author China Miéville, whom I shall return to in the final chapter, drew a brief comic strip for an alternative Iron Man, pitched it to Marvel, and was, unsurprisingly, rejected (see “Rejected Pitch”). The idea was ‘Scrap Iron Man’—a suit built from the scrapheap, and keeping its dirty, salvaged appearance. The suit is built by a group of disgruntled workers, previously employed by Stark Industries in the UK, before their factory was closed and the work outsourced. The aim of the group is to take revenge against Stark. The crucial difference is that the Scrap Iron Man is not an individual venture. It is built collaboratively, and it will be piloted collaboratively, each member of the group taking a separate task, such as targeting, flight, and so on. The idea is that a group working together in this way will be far better a pilot than the isolated Stark. The sadly aborted comic strip ends with a statement that captures the utopian gesture that lies behind this reimagining, and which pinpoints what is arguably the crucial basis of any possible resistance to neoliberalism—upon launching Scrap Iron Man for the first time, it says simply, “*we* are Scrap Iron Man”. The contrast between the limits of individual agency and the potential of communal agency, as well as their respective political orientations, is pointed. Perhaps one of the fundamental limits on an

ability to imagine an alternative outside the horizon of capital is whether one imagines change created through individual or communal agency. Tony Stark (or Aldrich Killian) is only one man, and is severely limited as such in his ability to change social relations, except, one presumes, by force. The limiting of a sense of agency to the individual is one key means that neoliberal ideology maintains limits on social imagining (the rational, selfish individual, connected to others only through the market, a society that is nothing but the accidental result of all the individual patterns of action). Over the following chapters, the qualitative difference between imagining agency as an individual, and doing so as a collective will be investigated, along with the potential for a more radical political imagination revealed by various metamorphoses in the application of purity/impurity discourses.



### 3.

## DESTABILISING ONTOLOGY: TRANSGRESSION, AGENCY AND A CONFLICT OF VALUES IN *ROADSIDE PICNIC*

### Introduction<sup>48</sup>

The new millennium has seen a resurgence of interest in the works of the Strugatsky brothers, Boris and Arkady. After a long quiescence, their works are being reissued and retranslated *en masse*, including a recent new translation of what is perhaps their best known book in the West, *Roadside Picnic*, on which Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) is loosely based. The reason for this re-emergence of interest, presaged by a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* in 2004 ("After the Thaw") is not immediately obvious: as authors of non-mainstream, atypical sf, a concrete product of its Soviet context, "the Strugatskys' contemporary popularity seemingly defies common sense" (Kluger 415).

To account for the cultural shift of interest it is necessary to consider how the Strugatskys' work is resonant with the specific imaginative needs of the age. What is it in their work (*Roadside Picnic* in particular, the focus of this chapter) that manages to articulate and sublimate the felt contradictions and confusions of the contemporary neoliberal moment? Why, in other words, is it particularly *good to think with*? The context in which the work was produced would seem to be worlds away from that of the neoliberal West in the 2010s: the Strugatskys were "eminently political authors" (Simon 378), writing under the active censorship of the Soviet bureaucracy. An initial clue to their resonance lies in the foreword to the new translation of *Roadside Picnic*, where Ursula le Guin notes that they wrote "as if they were indifferent to ideology [...] they wrote as free men write" ("Foreword" vi). In other words, from their particular socio-historical position, and under the restrictive pressures of a Soviet bureaucracy bent on maintaining a party-line often

in the face of—and with the intent to shape—lived reality, the Strugatskys managed to create work that could not be reduced to a particular articulated or official or closed perspective. It is not simplistically ‘for’ or ‘against’ something in the way of proselytising ideologues (for example, the infamous ‘boy and tractor’ genre of Socialist Realism); it “avoided framing banal alternatives” (Simon 385); it has a sense of realism that was, under the circumstances, necessarily achieved through their use of fantastical content. Most importantly, it articulates a sense of hope and possibility—a break or transgression of the status quo, performed—that enriches the realism rather than destroys it. This positions the novel as open to the future, providing the sense of freedom that Le Guin recognises. Given the conclusions of the previous chapter concerning the ideological work performed by *Iron Man 3*, the picture of reality presented, the present difficulties of thinking beyond the horizon of capital, and the occlusion of alternative futures by a global neoliberalism, the resonance and importance of the Strugatskys becomes clear. They found a way to write ‘like free men’, and to think the break with the status quo—as such their work holds important lessons for those in the present moment who wish to do the same. As I’ll discuss in the following analysis of *Roadside Picnic*, their deployment of purity/impurity discourses is central to this achievement.

The power and relevance of the pair’s work, and a further clue to their current revival, can also be seen in the fact that *Roadside Picnic* is a privileged text for the so-called New Weird, evidenced in China Miéville and M. John Harrison’s direct use of its tropes in *Railsea* and *Nova Swing* respectively (considered in the following chapters), and in the persistence of its themes more generally. To borrow from Walter Benjamin (“Theses”), *Roadside Picnic* has all the qualities of a memory flashing up in a moment of danger and need; a memory that is being seized, and used to illuminate the present. It is the purpose of this chapter to use the concerns of the present to illuminate the text and visa-versa.

## Realism, the Fantastic & Censorship

The first thing to note is the tension between realism and fantasy in the text, and to propose a connection between that and notions of ‘telling the truth’ or ‘writing like free men’. Bould & Miéville claim that real life under capitalism is a fantasy and therefore it is the very fantasy of fantasy as a mode that allows it to provide clear insight into capitalism as lived experience. But it is not only under capitalism that life can be understood as a fantasy, and in which, to write realistically, an author must turn to ‘irreal’ genres and techniques: the Strugatskys are far from alone in taking to fantastical narratives in order to write more freely under constraints of censorship. As Zoltán András Bán puts it, speaking of the famous Hungarian author István Örkény and his fantastical, surreal, *One Minute Stories* collection (appearing originally in 1968):

A prose writer of ‘existing socialism’ could in no way depict the world of his age truthfully, as he kept bumping into taboos [...] Under circumstances like this, realism loses credit and grows atrophied and thin.

An author that wishes to depict a reality contrary to the official line finds outlet elsewhere. Le Guin notes that sf “lends itself readily to imaginative subversion of any status quo. Bureaucrats and politicians, who can’t afford to cultivate their imaginations, tend to assume it’s all ray-guns and nonsense, good for children” (vi). Sf and fantasy have historically been successful in concealing messages unpalatable to the political status quo—allowing the author to show the world as they saw it, rather than how it was ‘supposed to be’ seen. This flight into fantasy is performed precisely in order to allow the author to approach reality in all its fullness: to subvert officially sanctioned stock characters and fates; to “wear masks of a grotesque kind and present the truth” (Brecht, in Adorno et al. 83); to present an alternative “epistemological category framed and staged in aesthetic terms” (Jameson, “A Note” 261) that provides the ‘poetics of

immediacy' that Jameson claims is the mark, promise and justification of realism. In such a situation, where the dominant sanctioned mode of perceiving and articulating reality *is clearly a fantasy itself*—clearly a construct, clearly a narrative—then at this point 'fantasy' becomes more real than 'realism'.<sup>49</sup>

Rather than 'capture reality', the genre of realism creates its effects primarily through the rejection of established, reified and thus generally perceived as 'artificial' or 'literary', narrative tropes, agents and structures (Jameson, "A Note"). The realist text works to affirm the historical singularity of subject and narrative against its incorporation into a previous narrative archetype (261-2). This is important because to successfully domesticate the present under a traditional or reified narrative is, firstly, to render it an iteration of an apparently eternal type and, secondly, to reinforce the 'truth' of that narrative, and the socio-economic structures that undergird it (to make of it, in a sense, a purity discourse). The realist text, by rejecting established narrative structures, gains an appearance of realism, in that 'reality', in the last analysis, is what lies outside of our ability to schematise it, what disrupts our efforts to ascribe identity and order. More interestingly, the text that affirms this disruptive quality of reality presents an implicit and potentially radical rejection of an extant world-view as being insufficient to the representational demands of the present. Fantastic texts are equally capable of this literary technique, though while realism works against content and form found within its own mimetic precursors, sf and fantasy suffer a different burden (and opportunity) in the weight of their own generic traditions; what has been termed the 'megatext' (Broderick). Especially given the typically faithful readership of genre fiction, any new text that enters the constellation is properly understood against a background of other texts in which its tropes and novums have been founded, elaborated and subverted to new ends. It is against these innovations-become-formulas that a realism—as against what Jameson calls the "stock formulaic cast of fantasy characters" with their strict "separation of functions" (*Archaeologies* 59), and standardised narratives—can be effected by

refusing and transgressing expected traditional character-types, narrative patterns and tropes which have become, through a process of cultural sedimentation, understood as “conceptions of destiny or fate” (Jameson, “A Note” 262), or which at the very least *assert* themselves as such.

This argument follows a similar compelling logic to Roland Barthes’ famous claim that the ‘reality effect’ of realism was produced by signs that short-circuited their signified, and went direct to the referent—they signified nothing more than ‘I am real’, and as such were intrinsically anti-narrative. The corollary of this for Barthes was of course that even the most ‘realist’ text had a profoundly unrealistic narrative running through it, which was hung with realism as a skeleton is hung with muscle, skin and hair. In *Roadside Picnic*, we have a text that utilises precisely these ‘realist’ techniques, but remains in a fantastical context. In the Strugatskys’ situation, it was the realism-by-decree that provided the reified narrative. Notions of inexorable communist progress and victory, evidenced in any number of slavish sf works from the period, including some earlier works by the Strugatskys,<sup>50</sup> provided the inevitability of fate against which ‘realism’ produces its effects by insisting on the contingency of history and the singularity of the historical moment.<sup>51</sup> The Strugatskys’ also overturned commonly-known fairy tale paradigms in their work, and wrote in productive tension with a more direct allegorical mode.<sup>52</sup>

Through these ‘realist’ techniques—the most obvious of which is the humiliating ignorance of humanity in the face of the alien visitation and its left-behind detritus; puncturing teleologies of human superiority, progress and the power of science—*Roadside Picnic* manages to remain in the fantastical context but avoid the simplicity of banal alternatives or the childishness of escapist heroic narratives. But that is not all. While the fantastic allows the novel to escape diktat realism, it does much more than that. It also allows it to escape realism’s “ontological commitment to the status quo” (Jameson, “A Note” 262), as we shall see more clearly below. The fantasy of the mode allows it to incorporate *as if real* the very ontological instability and epistemological uncertainty that is both anathema to dominant ideologies and the essence of

reality as lived historical experience. By doing so it goes some way towards disrupting the power of purity discourses and introduces a space for possible transgression, radical difference and utopia that precisely threaten the status quo. It is by means such as these that *Roadside Picnic* has the capacity to be paradoxically realist within a fantastical context and provide a sense of freedom from dominant notions of inevitability and impossibility. This is the much more difficult road taken by any narrative that wishes to immerse itself in ‘how things are’ and yet not give up the agency that lies in the impulse to see ‘how things could be’.

### **Roadside Picnic & The Post-generic Fantastic**

Clearly, there is no official censorship at play in the contemporary UK where China Miéville and M. John Harrison are writing—no identifiable and arbitrary apparatchiks—yet there are nonetheless discernable limits on what it is possible to think and to say, and certainly there are boundaries—enforced in the fields of academia, publishing, and in critical evaluations of literature through critical reviews and national awards—to what is accepted as ‘worthwhile’ literature, with the fantastic typically relegated to what the Germans would call *trivalliteratur* (unless it is deemed to have ‘transcended the genre’; a phrase that says it all). The publishing industry is a powerful gatekeeper; under the cosh of the drive for profit it is seemingly bent on regurgitating ‘what sells’, and is in great part responsible for the volumes of formulaic Tolkienesque that weight the bookshop shelves. Harrison and others have previously commented on how fortunate Miéville was in getting published initially, and how other similarly post-generic authors like Steph Swainston are now able to force their way through the newly-recognisable gap in the market opened by Miéville (see Cramer). More fundamentally, there is a limit on what it is possible to say and have taken as realistic and plausible, rather than fantastic, utopian or ideological. This normative ‘realism’ extends its unified reach across the disciplinary and discursive power-base of domestic politics (the inheritance of Margaret Thatcher’s infamous

‘There Is No Alternative’ and New Labour), international relations (see Booth, for example) and economics, with significant and pernicious influence in structuring contemporary popular culture more generally. This is the capitalist realism of recent fame (Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*). The expression marks censorship of an insidious cast: not one performed openly by an agency against which to struggle and around which to sneak, contributing an energy of resistance to politically subversive work through a demand for innovation and creativity. Rather, this is unconscious self-censorship, where the effort to ‘write the truth’ is guided by taboos born of a discourse of purity that alleges to demarcate truth and a realistic, mature attitude—rather than power—and where transgression is likely to be seen as immature rather than dangerous or meaningful. In this ideological climate, the effort to imagine differently is neutralised by the sheer weight of ‘realism’ opposing it, resulting in the efflorescence of childish, reactionary and libidinal fantasy that operates much like Adorno’s ‘free time’, in that it provides simple respite from the cruel quantifications of capitalist reality while also being completely defined by it.

This need to escape the weight of capitalist common sense pushes our rebellious truths and their articulation into the realm of fantasy, as the only place with enough freedom to articulate them—the only place that allows “a hard-headed consciousness of capitalist reality” (Bould, “The Dreadful Credibility” 83-4). But along with that comes the difficult need to de-infantilise the fantastic—in a culture in which rationality can only be assigned to means-ends calculations, and imagination untethered to entrepreneurship and profit is precisely the realm of children—to somehow empower it to speak seriously and sincerely, and to a serious and sincere audience: to drag the fantastical away from anaesthetising candyfloss to its powerful potential to reconfigure reality. But equally, using the fantastic allegorically to critique and comment in a one-to-one correspondence with the capitalist realism in play is not enough – it once again guts the fantastic of any autonomy, and ties it back to a direct relation with the world as we are *told* it

is. At this point, as I noted earlier, I diverge completely from Suvin's understanding of sf. He claimed in 2013 ("An Approach") that:

All sf texts are more or less clear parables, whose clarity is strongly responsible for the story's coherence and significance, so that you can say that here the vehicle becomes secondary, and we can use the false analogy of time travel as long as it doesn't become the tenor, or the meaning; then we cannot use it.

Here he is mistaken. It is absolutely necessary for the vehicle to 'become the tenor'—to take on a life of its own, and a logic of its own, because without this the story can only ever fold itself back into the very ideological milieu that it strives to escape, and to reflect upon. Knowledge of the blighted nature of contemporary life is not in short supply—it is precisely knowledge of the situation without a sense of agency to affect it that is responsible for the contemporary aporia memorably pinpointed by Jameson and Žižek and any number of others, in which sheer cynicism allows the capitalist subject to both know the irrationalities of the system and not to act; in which the end of the world is easier to imagine than the end of capitalism.

Against this background, the New Weird—specifically the work of China Miéville, and more broadly, his brand of post-generic fantastic—can be seen as a literature that attempts to return to the world that birthed it through an austere and yet fecund rejection of any split between reality and fantasy. Through a commitment and a dedication to the autonomy and richness of the fantastic, the New Weird is a set of narrative strategies that returns to reality *through* the hallucinogenic cornucopia, and particularly through the deployment and valorisation of discourses of impurity against those of purity, discovering in the heart of the fantastic a clearer grasp of lived reality, rather than dwelling in an appearance of reality that cloaks its fantastic and ideological origins. And these qualities inhere to *Roadside Picnic*, which provides us with a



privileged point of comparison—a similar response to a, *mutatis mutandis*, similar situational need—that illuminates the historical necessity of the contemporary emergence of the New Weird and the work of Miéville in particular. As this chapter will demonstrate, the Strugatskys developed in *Roadside Picnic* a particular set of tropes, culminating in what can be described as an impure, grotesque or dialectical realism, and articulating a particular set of interests around possibility, value and utopia. This is a constellation which has been revitalised by its resonance with the needs of the present moment, and which confirms *Roadside Picnic* as a privileged Ur-text for the New Weird.

### **An Energetic Ontology & The Flaw**

The broadest point of interest of *Roadside Picnic* to contemporary radical concerns is its presentation of a world that is fundamentally unstable, a world that refuses to be captured by purity discourses, that refutes essence; a reality that is seen as in motion, seen as ever on the edge of tipping over into something unexpected, seen, ultimately, dialectically – in terms of *potential to become* rather than static being. It accomplishes this through the introduction of what I will call an ontological *flaw* into the material world in which the narrative is set. The flaw is a means of creating a knowable correlative for that which is beyond knowledge—a representation of the unrepresentable—manifesting as a rent in reality which acts as a fountainhead for new and inexplicable things and events. The flaw is the specific means by which the narrative creates an effect of an ontologically unstable reality, and generates an epistemological uncertainty in its characters and readers. Typically manifest within the text spatially or materially, (i.e. it's a place or a thing, not a state of mind), the flaw—clearly a fantastical, non-mimetic narrative construct—can nonetheless be understood as a placeholder for a critical and historical perspective (i.e. it is a state of mind after all) that is in the last analysis much more 'realistic' than not. Finally, and with primary relevance to Miéville and the New Weird, such a flaw destabilises the status quo in

which it is embedded, as its sheer existence is an unanswerable rejoinder to any universalising ideological claims of epistemological universality or ontological security—the flawed ‘reality’ is constantly in danger of tipping over into something unexpected. This has the correlative effect of disturbing the present’s grip on the future—the grip of prediction and repetition. There is no ‘end of history’ here; rather the opposite (and again, far more ‘realistic’) struggle to sustain a meaningful human history in the face of consistent contingency. Finally, an important aspect of this perspective is that it is not presented by any means as unequivocally ‘good’ or ‘bad’: the mutable potentiality that defines reality is the source—to paraphrase Heidegger’s Hölderlin—of danger as much as a power that saves.

The flaw in *Roadside Picnic* is the Zone. Swallowing some half of the town of Harmont where the tale is set, the Zone is one of six like areas around the globe irrevocably altered by an alien visit. Inside its borders reality ceases to follow the customary rules; it is an eldritch place abundant with ill-understood dangers and patchwork temporalities. No contact was ever made with the aliens, and their nature and motivation remain a xenological mystery akin to that of Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris*. Privileged by the title of the novel is the emphatically unscientific pet theory of one Dr Pillman, Nobel laureate, that the zones are the remnants of an alien picnic; accidentally scattered refuse left with no purpose to communicate, hinder or help. The story mostly follows Red, one of a new breed of ‘stalkers’—men who risk life and limb at night to breach the military perimeter set up around the Zone, run the gauntlet of alien terrors within it, and hopefully return with salvaged alien objects that can be sold on the black market.

The objects range from the fairly common and harmless, though mysterious, ‘empties’—two disks of metal like the ends of a container, but with nothing in between except an invisible and unbreakable force that holds them in place—through the useful and profitable ‘spacecells’—perpetual batteries that multiply by division under certain conditions—to the mythical and deadly ‘deathlamp’, or ‘hellslime’, which maim and murder. These objects are so far beyond

human science that they sit uncomfortably on the edge of Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum that any sufficiently advanced technology will appear to those less advanced as magic, and as such their effect on human society has been a thoroughly impure and disruptive one. They completely invalidate recent human science, and the best responses have taken the shape of truly fantastical-seeming speculations on new properties of space and time that were completely unsuspected. In a key conversation in the middle of the book, Dr Pillman sums up the situation with two comments regarding the Zone and its objects: "I am absolutely convinced that in the vast majority of cases we are hammering nails with microscopes" (1977 translation: 136) he says with regard to human application of the objects, and "these are miraculously received answers to questions we don't yet know how to pose" (1977 translation: 137).

Science as an institution has been thoroughly humbled by the visit, and perhaps worse, made to seem dull: novelty, discovery and progress are now properties of the Zone and its products. The story opens on a radio interview with Dr Pillman, in which he becomes annoyed with the presenter for not wanting to talk about anything other than the Zone. Pillman's own Nobel prize was awarded for science unrelated to the Zone, and his wry cynicism as to the value of 'Zone-science' ("A lab monkey presses a red button and gets a banana, presses a white button and gets an orange, but has no idea how to obtain bananas or oranges without buttons. Nor does it understand the relationship between buttons and oranges and bananas" [136]) strikes an ironic attitude to the 'wonders' of the Zone, and its ostensible infantilisation of science and indeed humanity as a whole. From this weary perspective, humans are no longer the pioneers of the universe, explorers at the frontier of the possible, but mean salvagers, grubbing around in the trash of heedless gods. The crucial shift here is from a sense of humanity in some respects in charge of its own destiny, to a humanity suddenly relegated to a mere effect of the Zone and its products. The manner in which the visit took place further emphasises this Copernican or Darwinian movement of decentring humanity—it is as if the inhabitants of planet Earth were not

even worth noticing, let alone contacting. After the long search for and expectation of ‘intelligent life’, after the hidden anthropocentricity of our notions of alien otherness and even our idea of ‘intelligence’ in the first place—“if an alien creature has the honour of being psychologically human, then it’s intelligent” (131) as Pillman states—humanity suddenly finds itself, in the world of *Roadside Picnic*, humiliatingly relegated to the other side of that equation, where human intelligence did not even register upon another, more advanced psychology. This new and rather pathetic position in the cosmic hierarchy is efficiently illustrated in the story by “an immense banner, already faded” that has been put up at the military entrance to the Zone, which reads “WELCOME TO EARTH, DEAR ALIENS!” (20).

### **The Zone as Impure, the Zone as Utopian**

Pillman’s ironic resignation is not the only response to the Zone registered in the text. Stalkers see it as a space of opportunity—Red in particular sees it as a means to maintain his independence from the official bureaucratic structures he so despises. The particular brand of gangsterism that emerges in the community of stalkers is partly a product of the Zone’s fecundity for those willing to take illegal risks in the pursuit of primitive accumulation. Before considering Red in detail, I will first outline the responses to the Zone of two friends of his: Gotalin, a resident of the town, and Kirill, a brilliant scientist studying the alien objects at the official military and scientific institute attached to the Zone, with whom Red briefly works. These two characters bookend what might be called the utopian spectrum of attitudes to the Zone and its strange fruit. Gotalin is a huge (and black, perhaps significant for its contrast to Kirill’s pale skin) drunkard who wraps the Zone in the religious discourse of Satan, evil and sin. For him, every object removed from the Zone is “another work of Satan [brought] into this world” (45), a source of suffering and grief. He admonishes the world to live as if the Zone didn’t exist and, when he has money, buys up objects taken from the Zone in order to bury them back inside, in the vain hope

of containing them (45). For Gutalin, the Zone is a source of danger, a place that produces and can produce only evil. Kirill thinks the opposite: a utopian idealist who sees in the Zone and its objects the opportunity to better the lot of mankind. Kirill dies early on, so most of the reader's experience of him is second-hand—through the admiration of fellow-scientists, and in particular Red's recollections of him—which strips complexity from the representation in that the real Kirill is obscured in the text by Kirill-in-Red's-mind, where he undoubtedly stands for the purely utopian, positive view of the Zone. At one point we are given Kirill's words (or at least their sentiment) in Red's mouth:

Our little town is a hole. Always was and always will be. Except right now [...] it's a hole into the future. And the stuff we fish out of this hole will change your whole stinking world. Life will be different, the way it should be, and no one will want for anything. That's our hole for you. There's knowledge pouring through this hole. And when we figure it out, we'll make everyone rich, and we'll fly to the stars, and we'll go wherever we want. That's the kind of hole we have here... (42)

This is a very important segment of the novel, juxtaposing the key themes of temporality, freedom, utopia and value, which I will return to a number of times during this reading. For now, what is important is that these were the hopes of Kirill, as Red understands them. And Kirill's utopianism remained, it seems, at the unarticulated level that these hazy universalising claims suggest (again, in so far as Red understood them), since much later in the text Red states that ““words were not what Kirill had left behind him—he'd left some vague pictures, very kind, but utterly improbable” (191); an indication of the struggle to imagine utopia that *Roadside Picnic* explicitly confronts.

The structural opposition produced between Gutalin, the black giant of a man who interprets the Zone through a schema of religion and sin, and Kirill, the white scientific man who sees in it the potential for utopia, produces a tension between two competing discourses—reactionary and traditional on the one hand, future-oriented and progressive on the other—and associates those discourses with particular cultural and aesthetic markers; ones familiar from the previous chapters’ forays into notions of purity and impurity.<sup>53</sup> Much as Killian and Stark were seemingly bifurcated but both, ultimately, manifestations of capital, Kirill here would appear to occupy the ‘pure’ pole, and Gutalin is caught up in the aesthetic and semiotics of impurity, but their positions are both generated in relation to the same thing: the Zone. Here is something that is clearly ‘impure’ yet read in two opposing ways. The paradoxical nature of impurity—both destructive and productive, both decay and growth, entropic and utopian—is split and given narrative voice by the binary of Kirill and Gutalin, and these extreme poles are incapable separately of appreciating the full complexity of the situation they are faced with. This insight can be turned back onto *Iron Man 3*, where capital itself can of course be understood as an impurity—Schumpeter’s ‘creative destruction’—from the perspective of any political or social status quo desiring to maintain itself. If anything, from the perspective of a humanity concerned with achieving and maintaining a qualitative social good, rather than the pursuit of profit, the inhuman power and influence of capital could be considered the ultimate and most potent impurity.

In the text, Kirill is a sign for a slightly naïve idealism, lacking a grasp of the uglier truths of reality. As Red states:

It’s very nice for Kirill to argue that the Zone will help bring about world peace and eternal sunshine. Kirill is a great guy, no one would call him dumb—in fact, he’s as smart

as they come—but he doesn't know shit about life. He can't even imagine the scum that gathers around the Zone. (49)

As for Gultin, it's not so much that he sees a corrupt humanity, but that he sees the Zone as corrupting in the influence that its objects are having on the society of Harmont. He is unable to conceive of any good that will come from the change it brings—he states “awake, you're blind, plunging into the abyss and dragging other blind men behind you!” (45). He wants, impossibly, to put the genie back in the bottle.

### **Competing Approaches**

The Zone and its objects highlight the failures—or perhaps the incompleteness—of rational, scientific discourse, and its historical tendency, hand in hand with empire, to imperialistic encroachment on virgin territories. Contrast the stalker with the scientist. The former navigates the zone by instinct, relying on the moment-to-moment application of rules of thumb (“stalker's second commandment: it has to be clear for a hundred paces either to your left or to your right” [20]), the reading of warnings, signs and symptoms (some of which are the remains of former explorers, the Ur-warning of any new environment), and their incorporation into a narrative. They learn to survive with the landscape, picking up tricks like carrying a pocketful of nuts and bolts to throw ahead and test the way (27), and landmarks, cracks in the pavement by which they can gauge if something has changed or not, if the way remains clear or not (28). Their mode of operation is one suited to a world which is fundamentally unstable, one in which there is no predictive confidence, where hidden realities must be read from shifting surface symptoms alone.<sup>54</sup> The names which the stalkers give to the Zone's objects are reflective of this attitude; names like ‘witches’ jelly’, ‘spitting devil's cabbage’ and ‘bugtrap’ manifest a folkloric sensibility

with visceral and magical connotations, emphasising an animist agency of object and environment, its otherness and incomprehensibility.

The scientist, on the other hand, deals in maps (to the scorn of the stalker – “according to the map there’s nothing there, but who trusts maps?” [25]). They do not attempt to live with the Zone, but to control it through itemisation, through quantification, and try to convert it from a place of otherness into an extension of their own sterile laboratories. This is the colonising aspect of purity discourse, the effort to reduce the Other to the Same. They are gradually constructing a road into the Zone, with way-markers, and use small passenger cars called ‘boots’ that float over the surface of the Zone, so in a sense they cannot truly be said to ‘enter’ it at all. As the novel jumps ahead in time, individuals no longer even broach the Zone: the job is taken over by robots, and the otherness of the Zone takes on a particular split quality of being both completely effaced by mediation through technological means and completely preserved due to a total lack of engagement on any affective level (where the subject and the other are both altered in a dialectic of negotiation). The Zone becomes a foreign land to be pillaged *and* contained. The scientists typically give to the Zone’s objects rational-sounding names—‘colloidal gas’ or ‘graviconcentrates’, for example—but they fall into folkloric language—“the wish machine, Dick the Tramp, happy ghosts”—when they are dealing with things that they understand explicitly as “legends and semilegends” (138), and so nominally marked as outside the remit of reason. Of course, the joke here is that, since the Visit, reality in its entirety is proving to be beyond the realm of reason, and consistently evading the grip of attempts to essentialise, or identify. The most devastating example of this is the effect the Zone has on those who were present in Harmont at the time of the Visit: they are “surrounded by extraphysical, extrabiological phenomena” (139). If these affected individuals emigrate to a different place, accidents and catastrophes and natural disasters occur in their new place of residence with greater frequency relative to the number of emigrants. Or again, stalkers have mutant children despite the lack of



any detectable radiation in the Zone. These phenomena are the most frightening from the scientific perspective because they don't just contravene one law or another, they are a "violation of the principle of causality" itself (141), a fact which shakes the foundations of a positivist science and causes Dr Pillman to wonder "what am I supposed to do under these circumstances – start to believe in witchcraft? In the evil eye?" (140-1). The Zone makes manifest the insufficiency of purity, essence or reason to truly grasp reality, and in doing so, makes reality itself impure, throwing explanations into a more fantastical register through necessity.

Clearly, the techno-scientific process described is in many ways a better, safer, more objective and progressive approach. But it presumes to capture once-and-for-all the object, to name it and fence it off. As Red says of the scientists:

The most important thing for them is to come up with a name. Until he comes up with one, you feel really sorry for him, he looks so lost. But when he finds a label like 'graviconcentrate', he thinks he's figured it all out and perks right up. (26)

In actuality the label—like the map, like the road through the Zone—provides a false impression of control and understanding in as much as it produces representations that appear deceptively comprehensive, static impressions that run the risk of obscuring both the fluctuating and badly-understood reality which is their referent (the object, the ground, the 'safe' path) and the possibility of radical newness emerging divergent to their internal parameters of explanation and perception. Stalkers feel instinctively that this leads to disaster—as Red says of a particularly cocky scientist named Austin:

I think he's already doomed. You can't explain this to Kirill, but I know these things: the man has decided he's got the Zone completely figured out, and so he'll soon screw up and kick the bucket. (10)

In all these ways the Zone contributes to undermining universal claims to truth, or ontological stability. As *flaw*, it raises uncertainty to fever pitch, and allows, as I'll explore, some freedom through that uncertainty: if the present is acknowledged to resist knowledge to some degree, then claims to essence can be more easily refuted, and the unfolding of the present into the future grows unpredictable. From this perspective, the ideological closure promulgated by, for example, globalising neoliberalism, appears more brittle, and the possibility of realising alternatives—political, social, economic—becomes a more reasonable proposition.<sup>55</sup>

### **Chasing value or creating values**

In many ways the Zone (as *flaw*) can be understood as *liminal*, in the original anthropological sense famously developed by Victor Turner, of a space outside social structure, a space wherein social structure has not, to paraphrase Benjamin, been founded and sustained.<sup>56</sup> In this way it is akin to historical frontiers of opportunity such as the Wild West, or the various global mineral rushes, and the type of socio-economic relations that arise in conjunction with it bear out this relation—it is a place of *social transformation*. It attracts

[...] thousands who had recently flocked to Harmont looking for hair-raising adventures, untold riches, international fame, or some special religion; they came in droves but ended up as taxi drivers, waiters, construction workers, and bouncers in brothels – yearning, untalented, tormented by nebulous desires, angry at the whole world, horribly disappointed, and convinced that here, too, they'd been cheated. (91)

This description, with its blend of hope, desire and disappointment, reminds us not only of the Wild West but perhaps even more of the contemporary lure of consumer capitalism, particularly in its mythical apotheosis of Los Angeles, or Hollywood. What makes the Zone and the socio-economic structures that spring up around it a place in which it appears that ‘anything is possible’, and yet results in crushing disappointment and broken dreams? Ultimately, even the economic prosperity and technological progress wrought by the Zone, even its most seemingly unambiguously ‘good’ and desirable products, leave a sour taste in the mouth; they are unsatisfying, devoid of *substance* in some way. It is my contention that *Roadside Picnic* is a tale best viewed as structured by the alchemical relation between value and desire (value in a broad sense, as I discuss below), and turns on a question not only of what values are good and proper to pursue, and which are ultimately *satisfying*, and finally how those different values manifest in material and social life, but on the key political question of who gets to define value in the first place, and how such definition is accomplished.

Values are ideas about what one ought to want, and are mixed—in practise and their articulation in actual behaviour—with assumptions as to the nature of reality and humanity. They tend to be asserted, unsurprisingly, through discourses of purity, which, as I discussed in the first chapter, are discourses that assert ontological claims in support of value judgements. As such, a conflict or struggle over the definition of what is valuable would be expected to play out through discourses of purity and impurity—assertions as to the nature of the world, denigrations of opposing claims. *Iron Man 3* narrated one such struggle, though harnessed closely to the ideological work of symbolic resolution and catharsis performed by that film. *Roadside Picnic*, on the other hand, narrates the incursion of an opposing, emergent value system into a dominant one, the former colonising the domain of the latter, forcing it into the residual position. It tracks this change over time, through the changes manifest in socio-economic relations, subjectivities

and built environment to name but the most obvious. The narrative is told from the perspective of the older value system (manifest in Red), which is as such portrayed as pure, and the coloniser (the Zone, its objects, and its social, economic and cultural effects) as impure. The Zone, and the ontological insecurity that pervades the world of *Roadside Picnic* thus resolves into a figure for the direct and subjective experience of the dissolution of a value-system—the result of the growing dominance of divergent and opposing ontological and axiological claims. But further (and this is particularly where the text resonates with the representational needs and political aspirations of China Miéville and the New Weird), the representation of the antagonism of values, and the correlative ontological insecurity, permits reality (specifically socio-economic reality) to become something *debatable* once again, something malleable, that is a result of values held and actions performed, rather than an essence. It thus allows the status quo to be depicted as changeable—not concrete—and dependent, and allows the representation of political agency, and, to a degree, that of willed social change. The representational techniques and narrative strategies involved are thus of great value to a radical societal imagination in today's globalised neoliberal world. To properly grasp how they function, a brief digression into an anthropological theory of value is necessary.

## **Value Theory**

In anthropology, theories of value (broadly understood, but primarily 'social' values: honour; prestige; the Good; and so on) and value systems do not boast a particularly successful history. Once considered a very important topic in promising valid cross-cultural comparisons, and as holding out the potential to reconcile divergent analytical approaches derived from a focus on either structure or agency, it never really bore fruit and, since the 60s, has mostly faded into the theoretical hinterlands. This left anthropological studies to speak of value and values *as if* there were a comprehensive theory behind it all, while in reality the definition was left conveniently

imprecise. More recently, the field has found new interest in the topic, led in particular by the original and suggestive attempt of David Graeber—in his *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*—to provide a grand synthesis incorporating both Marxian and Maussian approaches to value along with other relevant anthropological insights.

Graeber begins by noting that when we speak of value we tend to mean one of three different things: values in the ‘sociological’ sense, which are conceptions of what is good, proper or desirable in life; ‘economic’ value, as in the measurement of the degree to which objects are desired, through money or other means;<sup>57</sup> and ‘linguistic’ value, in the sense of the value of a word residing in its ‘meaningful difference’, as in Saussurian linguistics.<sup>58</sup> Graeber’s initial contention is that it is no accident we use the same word for all these meanings, and that previous attempts at a comprehensive theory of value failed precisely because they did not give sufficient consideration to at least one of them.

The historical purpose of a theory of value for Graeber has always been to reconcile social structure with individual desire—structure with agency—and to do so needs an understanding of the process by which meaning is transformed into desire, and vice-versa. He takes as his starting point the Marxian position that “what is ultimately being evaluated are not things but actions” (49). Pursuing this, Graeber wants to expand the notion of materialism, conceiving of any and all aspects of ‘society’ or human production as always comprised simultaneously of both creative action and concrete medium. By beginning from an ontology of action, movement and change, we can see the tendency to attribute value to objects rather than the actions that produced them as a crucial stage in our creative action, rather than a category error—the moment at which the value of our own actions is reflected back to us via a socially recognised token of that value. Graeber asks whether it is possible to extend a Marxian theory of value to non-marketised spheres of society, to the realm of ‘sociological’ values, and so to society as a whole, to describe a general social theory? The way to do this, he claims, is to begin from the

premise, drawn from studies of any number of non-market societies in the anthropological literature, that the main purpose of society, and the real source of value in it, is the production of people and social relations between people, not things.

The value of our actions that are responsible for the creation and recreation of society is captured in what Graeber calls ‘value-forms’; these can vary wildly from objects to particular socially-esteemed actions, but have certain qualities in common. They all measure and compare value: either through their presence as opposed to absence; by comprising elements of a ranking system; or through proportion, like money. They are necessarily media of value, in that they are physically and visibly present in some way to allow for their perception by a wider audience—essential for the realisation of value. Finally, they become an end in themselves, where rather than being seen as products of valued action, they are seen as inherently valuable or even the origin of value—as in fetishisation—and so they spur people to perform the actions that produce them: “the actions of shaping people become embodied in value-forms, that is, forms that reflect the meaning of my actions to myself in some tangible form as some object or action that I desire” (69) so that “the object of desire becomes an illusory mirror of the desirer’s own manipulated intentions” (105).

This final point is crucial, as it is the hinge that allows a possible reconciliation of social structure and individual desire. Particularly in alienated and highly individualised market-oriented societies, people do not immediately understand the importance of their actions as that of reproducing ‘society’, but without ‘society’, and its provision of a public field in which ‘meaningful difference’ can register, their actions would not be infused with value and meaning:

Productive labor creates value mainly in potentia. This is because value is inherently contrastive; thus it can only be made into a reality (‘realised’) in a relatively public context, as part of some larger social whole. (70)

Individuals see themselves as pursuing the things they value, and society is—not produced as such but is rather—“the total process through which all this activity is coordinated,” while value, in turn is “the way that actors see their own activity as meaningful as part of it” (76), or “how people measure the importance of their own actions within such structures” (230). Economic value and broader ‘conceptions of the desirable’ are here reunited, as refractions of the same thing, being refracted through different media of social value.

Now all this is pretty abstract, but further extrapolation demonstrates its explanatory power: wages, if we follow Marx, are the representation of the value of the worker’s labour, and yet it is fair to say that the worker *goes to work for their wage*. The token of value calls into being the very thing that it represents. Or, for a more romantic example, the ‘token of honour’—a handkerchief or some such, bestowed by an aristocratic lady—for which knights would compete at a tournament; it is their skill at war that is valuable, and the training they put in to achieve it, not to mention all the behind-the-scenes work that went into their armour, the tournament, the maintenance of a class with time to dedicate themselves to battle, etc., and yet the knight understands all this as for the purpose of achieving the prize, as the means of symbolising his ‘work’ to himself and to others, and the concomitant social relations are reproduced apparently incidentally, as opposed to being understood as the purpose of the whole affair. (Notice also that this is a clear example of the *public* recognition of value, one where all the multitudes involved in some way with the reproduction of the society and the arena of the joust would be present to witness the pinnacle of their society’s notion of value—one that was ultimately the embodiment of all their work as much as anyone else’s, but only widely recognised as this manifestation of social ‘values’ such as chivalry, honour, force, and so on. It hopefully goes without saying that these values are inevitably those of the ruling class become hegemonic, and that class’ public realisation of them plays a large role in the maintenance of its position). The possible examples

multiply indefinitely—a gig at Wembley stadium after years of solitary guitar practise; the national standardised examination system; compliments on your prowess at some activity or other; the publication, discussion and citation of an academic article; and so on.

The final point I want to make is to highlight a relatively undeveloped insight in Graeber's theory, where he briefly introduces the notion of history, or tradition, into the process of transforming meaning into desire:

[...] when one recognizes value in an object, one becomes a sort of bridge across time.

That is, one recognizes not only the existence of a history of past desires and intentions that have given shape to the present form of the object, but that history extends itself through one's own desires, wishes, and intentions, newly mobilized in that very act of recognition. In fetishizing an object, then, one is mistaking the power of a history internalized in one's own desires, for a power intrinsic to the object itself. (115)

Mark Fisher posits something similar from a more trenchantly Lacanian perspective when he speaks of an “historically machined inorganic libido” (“Post-Capitalist” 135). From the accumulation of a tradition of desire (via inherited social and cultural ideas of what is desirable—structure—and not forgetting the effective interventions of marketing into these socially circulated ideas) and its reproduction by extension through being manifest in the desire of the individual stems, for example, the various levels of prestige accorded to different academic journals, or the primacy of the iPhone over other brands. It suggests that social relations are reproduced through the positing of value-tokens, in social fields of differing standing, the desired obtaining of which produces the actions that constitute the very social relations that provide meaning to the tokens in the first place. So one is born into a pre-existing value-system of desire and meaning, and learns to unconsciously reproduce it by internalising that tradition in one's



desires.<sup>59</sup> It also infers an opposing mechanism, by which rapid changes in a society's circumstances, or the emergence of a competing value system (like the emergence of the market in a society previously without one, or of more horizontal, open-access publishing mediums like the internet in a traditionally hierarchical and ponderous system like academic publishing), could cause individuals or even a whole society to become alienated from their own inherited desire, or conversely from the emerging value-system of the society that surrounds them. This approach to value I find particularly suggestive in relation to *Roadside Picnic* and the New Weird, with (what I see as) their efforts to represent alienated desire and the positing of alternative and more meaningful values—values that are qualitative social goods, as opposed to quantitative monetary ones, and which have as their clear focus the production of a certain type of individual, and a certain type of social relation, above the production of goods and profits.

The importance, both of theorising this dislocation of values and the imposition of alternative values, and of understanding the representational strategies employed by *Roadside Picnic* in its effort to present the axiological conflict, is hopefully clear from a radical political perspective. As neoliberal governmentalities extend the logic of the market into areas such as healthcare, academia and the state itself—traditionally guided by notions of the social good as opposed to quantitative measures of efficiency, cost-benefit analyses, or simple profit—such a value-conflict is playing out at the heart of national and global institutions today, and restructuring the social relations that in turn produce the individuals whose actions comprise those relations. The goal posts are moved, and new generations are raised in a different climate, learn to consider themselves as brands rather than social individuals; flexible and competitive in selling themselves in the market-place. Discourses of purity and impurity patrol the borders of an essentialised notion of human nature as selfish, rational and entrepreneurial, and condemn those who refuse or are unable to match this norm. *Roadside Picnic* succeeds in representing a similar conflict, a very similar colonisation, and the more politicised post-genre fantastic texts of this

neoliberal moment draw on its techniques for their own uses. But *Roadside Picnic* also fails in some ways, and it is instructive to see where, why and how it does so, and to consider, as the following chapters will, whether Harrison and Miéville succeed, or at least fail better.

## **Value & Radical Hope**

To further theorise and concretise the operation and effects of such a dislocation of desire and meaning, it is useful to turn to Jonathan Lear's powerful account of the dislocation of an entire community from their traditional value system in his work *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. It deals with the fate of the nomadic Crow Nation of North American Indians, and particularly its chief, Plenty Coups, during the period when their hunting grounds and buffalo were stripped from them by the encroaching forces of the US. Relegated to a reservation, and both forbidden and often simply unable to practise their traditional ways of life, the Crow culture, with its value-systems and tokens and meanings that were intimately bound up with those ways of life (that *were* those ways of life), swiftly collapsed. What is most fascinating about Lear's account however, is the way in which he zeroes in on a statement by Plenty Coups, where the old chief, looking back over his life, refuses to talk about what happened after the tribe was placed in the reservation, saying simply "after this nothing happened" (2). Which is not to say that Plenty Coups 'did nothing'; far from it, he was instrumental in leading his tribe into their unexpected future with savvy and determination, playing a role of national import. Rather, what takes place is something far more fundamental than idleness or even depression. With the collapse of their value-system, the Crow were no longer able to ascribe significance to anything, and thus the circuit of value that Graeber describes—the transformation of desire into meaning—is cut, stripping even the most fundamental of actions, like preparing food, of the larger cultural significance and value it once carried.<sup>60</sup> Reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's notion of the 'shock' of the modern, which "de-historicizes experience, wresting it away from the

temporal continuities of tradition” (Osborne & Charles), this collapse has a number of connected effects. It throws the Crow into a relation with temporality where they exist in a single empty moment, unable to progress. It dismantles what Marshall Sahlins once called the “cultural scheme” through which events are appropriated and acquire historical significance, thus allowing a sense of history, identity and direction—in other words, allowing raw experience to be written into a continuous and meaningful narrative. It robs actions of significance, and reduces desire to the most basic of wants, dismantling the scaffold of ‘conceptions of the desirable’ upon which culturally richer and more ‘noble’ goals, that structured and ensured the reproduction of social relations, were hung. As Lear puts it:

What we have in this case is not an unfortunate occurrence, not even a devastating occurrence like a holocaust; it is a breakdown of the field in which occurrences occur. (34)

This is what it means to say, ‘after this nothing else happened’. The example is particularly instructive because, as well as providing a glimpse of just how intertwined values, meaning, desire and agency are, it drives home just how alienating the loss of that nexus can be—to be alienated not only from a sense of cultural belonging and secure identity, but from a sense of history and from your own agency. What it demonstrates particularly is the extent to which society can be viewed primarily as a pattern of action in which values are defined, created and realised. Finally, the brutal subordination and powerlessness of the Crow points up the opposite structural position, which, with a return to Graeber, is where this digression into value theory will come to a close. Because if society is a pattern of producing and reproducing values, and that system of values can be destroyed, then it follows that it can be transformed, and created anew also:

The ultimate stakes of politics [...] is not even the struggle to appropriate value; it is the struggle to establish what value *is* [...] Similarly, the ultimate freedom is not the freedom to create or accumulate value, but the freedom to decide (collectively or individually) what it is that makes life worth living. In the end, then, politics is about the meaning of life. (*Toward* 88)

If to be stripped of your ability to pursue your values is to be stripped of agency, and alienated from your desire, then it follows that the *defining of what is valuable* in the first place is an example of agency as a most perfect expression of desire in the act of creation. To define value in this way is to shape agency, to decide what *ought* to be desired, and ultimately, what manner of social relations and what type of people should be encouraged. It is precisely the tension between different patterns of agency, desire and value—individual and communal; residual, dominant and emergent—and the struggle to reject and decide dominant values that we find structuring *Roadside Picnic*, and dictating the necessity of its literary strategies.

### **Chasing Value or Deciding Value: Red**

In *Roadside Picnic*, alternative notions of value and desire are arrayed along private and public lines, with Red's home on the one hand, and the rapidly changing town of Harmont on the other. Red's relationship to and experience of these value systems are further focused through his relationships with Guta, his wife, and Dina, the daughter of the successful stalker Buzzard Burbridge. I'll take these one by one.

The Visit has utterly disrupted the usual way of things in Harmont, causing the security of traditional meaning, social structures and social values to break down, to be usurped by encroaching market and commodity relations.<sup>61</sup> This rupture is marked quite obviously by the Zone itself—cutting the town of Harmont in two—and also in the changes registered in the

make-up of the town—the way that the built environment changes rapidly over the course of the novel. Previously well-to-do rural areas now lie deserted (66) as the flow of money and people concentrate in the heart of the rapidly expanding and gentrifying town, much at odds with the fairly squalid haunts of the stalkers:

[...] the street in front of the Metropole gleamed with the chrome and lacquer of a colourful collection of cars, doormen in raspberry uniforms lugged suitcases towards the entrance, and some respectable foreign-looking men congregated in groups of two or three on the marble staircase, chatting and smoking cigars [...] at a table two steps away he saw three undercover members of the international police force, sitting silently [...] (79-80)

This passage condenses a number of signifiers of a modernised, thriving, globalised and cosmopolitan area—one that represents to Red, a native of Harmont, as much if not more of an invasion as the Zone itself. This ‘alien’ influx ceaselessly transforms the substance of Harmont, whereas the actual aliens, Red notes, “must have been decent guys” since “at least they put clear bounds on their crap” (21).<sup>62</sup> Later again and the changes have progressed further, with “[s]kyscrapers all around” and more under construction, and such obscenities as “the Luna Complex – featuring the world’s best jazz and a variety show and the brothel that’ll hold a thousand” (109). Meanwhile, “the suburbs are emptying out” (110).<sup>63</sup> The dramatic changes undergone by Harmont over the short span of less than ten years testify to a vast influx of people and international capital to the area, and the rapid growth of a number of industries, from military-industrial to entertainment and service, as well as the burgeoning black market that provides Red his income.

In one telling scene halfway through the book, as he walks through the middle of the new town, the impact of the changes are registered on Red as a vertiginous moment of full-spectrum anamorphosis:

Suddenly, he seemed to be in another world. A million smells assaulted him at once – smells that were sharp, sweet, metallic; dangerous, caressing, disturbing; as immense as houses, as tiny as dust particles, as rough as cobblestones, and as delicate and intricate as watch gears. The air turned hard, it appeared to have surfaces, corners, edges, as if space had been filled with huge coarse spheres, polished pyramids, and gigantic prickly crystals, and he was forced to make his way through all this, as if in a dream, pushing through a dark [junk]<sup>64</sup> shop full of ancient misshapen furniture [...] This wasn't another world—it was his same old world turning an unfamiliar side to him (83).

Significantly, Red has had such an experience before, but “never [...] outside the Zone” (83). The new Harmont is thus elided with the estranging reality of that other alien area so dramatically torn from its previous context, and the influence of the Zone is registered in the changing make-up of the new town—though Red recognises it all, there is nonetheless something unfamiliar about it, something not superficially recognisable. This is one of the few moments in the book where the desperate but nonetheless utopian realisation that Red comes to at the end manages to break through into his consciousness—that there is something fundamentally wrong about this new world. And just as the Zone produces monsters, the new cast of Harmont begets a new type of person and a new pattern of social relations. When the incident above occurs, Red is on his way to meet a pair named Raspy and Bony – contacts to whom he sells his Zone-gotten merchandise. As he enters the opulent hotel where they stay, the connection between new town, new people, and new values is made clear:

It stank of vulgarity, of the foul scum that had grown on the Zone, gotten rich by the Zone, fed, drank and fattened from the Zone, and didn't give a damn – and especially didn't give a damn about what would happen when it gorged itself to its heart's content and all that used to be in the Zone settled in the outside world (85).<sup>65</sup>

The lack of connection between these new people and the consequences of their actions to the town, and the outside world, stands in marked contrast to a more traditional sense of rootedness and locally-grounded identity manifest by Red in particular, as I'll discuss later. Red's extreme dislocation from the encroaching type of society he finds himself in here, however, is captured by a brief moment in his meeting with Raspy and Bony, immediately after his anamorphic experience, which also introduces the theme of the text's representation of desire/value relations through the symbolic use of women. Red picks up an adult magazine from the table and "the magazine was full of tight-bodied beauties, but for some reason looking at them right now nauseated him" (89). This moment presages the wider nausea Red comes to feel, the dislocation he suffers from the values and relations of this new world, and a sense of its impurity.

However, if the Zone and its products bred nothing but obviously 'foul scum', if there was never anything remotely desirable about them, then it would seem an easy matter to simply condemn them, protest them, have nothing to do with them. This is not the case. I've briefly mentioned Kirill, and the utopian, progressive promise of the Zone, and while the consequences of the Zone upon the outside world do not appear particularly utopian, yet they carry their own capturing of desire and reflection of value. This desire is precisely the desire for the commodity—the glossy surface that appeals and yet conceals beneath its surface the violence of its relations of production, and the labour that produced it, along with the tendency it creates to see people as

things and things as people. And it is here that I turn to Dina, the daughter of Burbridge, and symbolic embodiment of this emergent value-system.

## **Dina**

Dina's metonymic connection with the town and the new encroaching value-system is thoroughly evident. At the most obvious level, she is young and wealthy from her father's incursions into the Zone. She is also at the forefront of the social and cultural changes of the town—a glimpse of the lit windows of “gorgeous Dina's rooms”, in the Burbridge mansion in the centre of town, in which “you could see dancing pairs moving to the music” (110) prompts one character to muse, “either they've been up since dawn, or they're still going strong from last night [...] That's the fashion in town nowadays—parties around the clock” (111).

The first we hear of Dina is her father's comment that he's “spoiled” her and her brother Archie, “never denied them a thing” (61). This brief comment sets the stage for a familial relation that is based, from Dina's perspective, principally on the transactional level of her father's ability to provide material luxury rather than any bond of sympathy or respect, and, on Burbridge's side, a kind of wistful appreciation of her outward perfections (she's “a beauty” he says [61]), rather than her inner qualities or the quality of her relationship to him—reminiscent of a commodity relation. This mercenary familial relation is highlighted again when Burbridge is badly injured, and Red is provided an opportunity to leave him in the Zone, but does not. Dina's first reaction is “the last pay, then” (94), before she decries Red for a “redheaded idiot” who blew a great chance to get rid of “that piece of scum” (95). As Red states, “Burbridge sure finagled some great kids out of the Zone. Loving and respectful ones.” (96)

The first time Dina appears, she is introduced as a compound synecdoche of separate desirable objects, rather than a human being: “bare, tanned shoulders, a bright red mouth, and a waving hand” (93). This impression is immediately reinforced, in a description (through Red's



eyes) so gratuitous that its abundance can be read as a means of formally capturing the raw libidinal attraction:

silky, luscious, sensuously curvy, without a single flaw, a single extra ounce—a hundred and twenty pounds of twenty-year-old delectable flesh—and then there were the emerald eyes, which shone from within, and the full moist lips and the even white teeth and the jet-black hair that gleamed in the sun. (93)

Lying on the lawn of their sumptuous family home, sunbathing next to an ice bucket of expensive whiskey, the sensuousness, the overt ‘perfection’ of the surface appearance here—reminiscent of an advertisement—serves to present Dina as commodity to be consumed rather than a human being. And like a commodity she is free from the constraints of context; an object given meaning by its relations of possession and consumption, rather than community or familial ties, and so both her desirability *and* her availability are universal—she is “the universally desired slut” (188).<sup>66</sup>

Of course, Dina is quite literally a *product* of the Zone, her father having sacrificed a life in order to wish for her from the mystical Golden Ball, the legendary miracle-machine at the heart of the Zone. In that sense she is equivalent to the other objects that Gutalin decries as the work of Satan. But there is a more interesting interpretation to be had than that these objects, including Dina, are simply ‘evil’. In his brief analysis of *Roadside Picnic*, Jameson (*Archaeologies* 72-76) suggests that the products of the Zone are “the traces and the marks of a superhuman pleasure”, an “alien and transfigured form of *jouissance*” (75). Without simply reducing the Zone to an allegorical reflection of capitalism and its attendant abundance of commodity production, I suggest that what Jameson recognises as an ‘alien’ *jouissance* can be more profitably read as that bridging point at which individual desire and agency *become manifest* as material objects and meaningful patterns

of social relations. Hence the liminality of the Zone: standing as “the point where the individual comes into contact with the power of society itself”, it represents a “level of operations [...] that cannot be represented or fully accounted for” and which, pretty much universally across cultures, has been marked by resorting to “mystery, paradox, unknowability, or systematic inversions of normal ways of doing things” (Graeber, *Toward* 63). It is the point at which *what we put in* transforms into *what comes out*; and the product of our actions—society—tends to “seem something which stands alien, apart from us, something that constrains and controls us rather than the other way around” (64), even though it is not more nor less than the total pattern of actions of everyone producing it.

The genius of capitalism, as I noted in the previous chapter on *Iron Man 3*, is that it thrives on an excess of uncontrolled desire, unleashed by of a mode of production that has always relied on an underbelly of irrational, magical seduction and dreams of utopian transformative power in order to fuel its immanent lust for growth. What is truly alien about the Zone’s products, and alienating about its social influence, comes from the type of values informing the interaction with it—greed, individualism, and lust for power. Hence the sensual promise of Dina’s perfection, salaciously poured over by Red: the desire is human, but it reaches levels of ‘alien’ or superhuman excess when stripped of the mediating influences and values (in the sense of ‘notions of the good’) of family, community and home, and is embodied in and released by the products of the Zone—products apparently alien in their origins, seemingly free from human labour, and lavished upon humanity from something both monstrous and unimaginably powerful.<sup>67</sup> Graeber claims:

[...] the object of desire plays much the same role as Lacan’s mirror-objects: it represents an imagined wholeness on which desirers can fix their own inchoate sense of self. Or—to return for the moment to Marx’s own dialectical terminology— it makes the desirer seem

an abstract content that can be realized only through that particular concrete form. (*Toward* 115)

Given this, the insertion of alien value-forms—commodities—into a circuit previously free of them would cause a profound dislocation of identity and desire in those seeking to recognise themselves in these objects that embody values alien to those in which the individual has traditionally been embedded. The effect would not be dissimilar to that of the subjective experience of objective cultural collapse undergone by the Crow tribe. In illustration, Red later reveals that he has slept with Dina in a crucial passage:

every single time it'd been a disappointment. It was beyond belief; such a luscious broad, you'd think she was made for loving, but in actual fact she was nothing but an empty shell, a fraud, an inanimate doll instead of a woman. It reminded him of the buttons on his mother's jacket—amber, translucent, golden. He always longed to stuff them into his mouth and suck on them, expecting some extraordinary treat, and he'd take them into his mouth and suck and every single time he would be terribly disappointed, and every single time he'd forget about the disappointment—not that he'd actually forget, he'd just refuse to believe his memory as soon as he saw them again. (158)

Again, here is explicit commodification of Dina, and the connection of her to a number of different objects—a shell, a doll, buttons. Dina has the superficial appearance of an extremely desirable object but—being the value-form of a set of unequal and exploitative social relations that are set up as anathema to the social goods represented in the text by family, community and so on, and which measure worth in quantitative terms alone—she is devoid of anything Red can truly recognise as substantial, as truly worthwhile. She can provide only as much as any

commodity can: a relation with a thing, thanks to the alienating mechanisms that produce them. And yet Red goes back to her again and again, despite his apparently authentic feelings for his wife. This is an example of the means by which capitalism has managed to actively *capture desire*, the way it “delibidinizes all things public, traditional, pious, charitable, authoritative, or serious, taunting them with the sleek seductiveness of the commodity” (Nick Land, qt. in Fisher, “Post-Capitalist” 132)

One final thing to emphasise in the passage above about Dina is the role played by *memory* in this circuit of desire and value. The desirability of Dina-as-commodity turns explicitly on the willed disjunction, or forgetting, of experience—it is the only way that she remains desirable—just as the desirability of the commodity, and the continuation of a market system in which every consumer is implicated in the brutality performed in the name of cheaper prices, turns on a continual forgetting, a repeated laundering of things and their contexts, and a submission to their ephemerally seductive qualities. Which in turn points to tradition, and memory, as sites of real and potential resistance.<sup>68</sup> These ideas of tradition, memory, and what Graeber might call a “human economy” (one concerned with the production of people not things) rather than a market economy, are concentrated in the text in Red’s home, in his daughter Monkey, his father, and most importantly, his wife Guta.

### **Guta, Monkey, Father & Home**

Guta’s first appearance in the text also focuses on her physical desirability, though in a more innocent way, and contains a sense of pride, and ownership, rather than the desire to consume provoked by Dina:

She's coming towards me, my beauty, my girl, showing her lovely legs, her skirt swaying above the knees as she walks; all the men ogle her as she passes by, while she keeps walking straight. (53)<sup>69</sup>

But the conversation instantly turns—Guta is pregnant with Red's child, and she wants to keep it, against the wishes of her mother, and even if Red leaves her. "I'll handle everything myself. I'll give birth myself, I'll raise him myself, I'll make him human myself" (54-5). Immediately Guta is reoriented here into the role of mother and wife, symbolic, in contrast to Dina, of the reproduction of a very different, competing, set of social relations and values; ones based around the domestic sphere, filial relations and the production of people—a human economy, in other words, where the focus of life is to raise and 'make human', where the focus is people, not things.<sup>70</sup> Guta's role in the rest of the book is to represent these values, every mention of her evoking the sense of a welcoming home:

She moved silently and gracefully through the kitchen – so capable and lovely – and water was already boiling on the stove, and fish scales were flying from under the knife, and oil sputtered in their biggest frying pan, and the incredible smell of fresh coffee spread through the air. (73)<sup>71</sup>

This is a good point at which to pause a moment and acknowledge that *Roadside Picnic*, for all its strengths as an sf novel, is written whole-heartedly under the male gaze. In fact, throughout the text, it makes much more sense to see the various articulations of womanhood as symbolic of competing attitudes to value and desire, as opposed to actual women—woman-as-symbol, rather than woman-as-such. Physical desirability—in a woman—stands as the marker of a desirable value-form, and its presence or absence is a significant thing within the text. Men are the

desirers, not the desired; the subjects, not the objects. Further, the women of the text are, as we have seen, organised according to a fairly stereotypical distribution of possible types—whores or wives pretty much covers it—and the agency of the women is defined by these roles. Guta, while described lovingly, is clearly the quintessential ‘perfect wife’; patient, competent, beautiful, she is happy to raise the child alone if needs be, she always waits for Red, and she is *always* in the kitchen. Dina on the other hand is closer to what we might think of as a misogynistic cliché of a ‘modern’ (‘Western’) individual. She sleeps around and is beholden to no man and so is a ‘slut’. Once this is acknowledged, however, it becomes possible to see that these crudely drawn types and their respective modes of ‘desirability’, are at the same time representative of larger questions of the desirability of different values and relations of production, which are condensed and channelled, via the male gaze, through these women-as-symbols, and turn on the male understanding of, and response to, their individual desirability. Guta represents the labour of *care*; the labour that *produces* the home and the hearth and the people that live there, materially and conceptually, which in turn represents the reproduction of a particular value-system, one oriented towards social goods rather than economic, and the reproduction of individuals who in turn are motivated by these values. This is what is being idolised when Guta is idolised, and precisely what is lacking—or more accurately, subcontracted out to the market—with Dina, whose actions go towards the reproduction of the commodity capitalist, materialistic and monetary value-system, which puts wealth before social good, and which produces and is further reproduced by its own concomitant forms of social relations. The crucial question being asked by the text, by the contrast of Guta and Dina, is which relations of production are desirable for the reproduction of human life? From this perspective, the different relations of all the male characters to women, and to these fundamental relations of production become significant. Burbridge beats his wife, maintains a butler, and buys the love of his daughter; Dick Noonan, who rises to power along with the rapid development of Harmont, becomes a brothel-keeper and

apparently lives in a hotel; Raspy and Bony, the shady gangsters, are only ever encountered in a hotel—that most commercial of domiciles—and have pornographic magazines in their suite. The relation of man to woman and home is thus a privileged means of signifying within the text different kinds of relations of production, different means of producing people, and different kinds of people produced, and the modes of desire and forms of value to which they correspond. The particular scenario of *Roadside Picnic* allows the clear dramatisation of these struggles, with the Zone itself making visible the ontological and epistemological struggles that are involved in such social changes. Particularly, it captures well the way in which such value-struggles are imbued by discourses of purity and impurity—in this case it is capitalist relations that take on the impure qualities, fascinatingly tempered by the utopian promise of its power, which inheres to all discourses of impurity as forcible means of opening up possibilities for change. The ontological instability of the Zone provides, as I'll discuss, a potent figure for the conceptual space in which the invisible potential of political agency can manifest into radical change. It is in this guise that the figure is picked up in the texts discussed in the following chapters. But equally, *Roadside Picnic's* representation of this potential political agency is, from the beginning, structurally doomed to failure thanks to its treatment of individual and communal agency, a discussion of which will close this chapter. I take the Zone, then, to be a literalising and making visible of the potency of agency in the act of remaking structure, and it is the effort to represent agency as such—achieved through discourses of impurity—which makes *Roadside Picnic* such a potent and resonant text for the radical imagination struggling to think against or outside the conceptual limitations imposed by the neoliberal present.

With all this in mind, it becomes significant that the other important female character—Monkey, Red's daughter—is a mutant. She is not a product of the Zone like Dina, but rather a consequence of its influence. She occupies a point of bifurcation in the value-systems operating within the text. Unlike both Dina and Guta, she is not physically 'desirable', and yet as Red's

child she is a loved member of the family; as a younger child, her “warm golden fur” (73) and excitable antics are adorable, but grown older, she becomes surly and withdrawn, her development making her divergence from humanity, and the public lack of acceptance of her, only more pointed. This is highlighted explicitly when Noonan visits the home and, in response to a question about finding a wife he “almost replied, as usual, *I’m waiting for the Monkey* but stopped himself in time. It wouldn’t have sounded right” (147). As the reality of her situation imposes itself more clearly with age, the joke loses its appropriateness. She is a casualty of the changes wrought by the Zone, and her undesirable outward appearance, coupled with her position as the product of the human economy symbolised by Red’s home, can be read as symbolic, not of objective ugliness, but of the values she signifies from the perspective of the now changed libidinal economy of the Zone-influenced society. The ugliness, the surliness and so on, of Monkey does *not* inhere in Monkey, but should be understood counter-intuitively as the product of a shift in the value-system of the wider society—it is how the older, traditional value-form (her reversion to ‘monkey’ is surely representative of her embodiment of an older, now outmoded value-form) now appears to the new value-system, misrecognised through the contemporary lens. It is not only the next generation of Red’s family that suffers this alienating fate. There is a crucial scene, closing the penultimate chapter, before Red’s desperate quest for the Golden Ball, which brings together Monkey and Red’s father; but a little background is necessary first.

As we have seen, the history of the town and its people has been ruptured from its present, covered over and forgotten under the gloss of material prosperity and productivity. In the novel, this loss of another way of life is vividly captured in the disturbing return of the town’s dead. One of the queerest effects of the Visit was the reanimation of corpses – among them Red’s father – who are treated by the townspeople with a mixture of confusion, pity and disgust. They are not dangerous. Once risen, they simply shuffle back to the house in which they lived, and if



they cannot get in, they sit quietly outside. A programme to remove them is initiated, and they are taken to research labs and other places, except for Red's father, who lives with Red and his family after Red fought those who came to take him away. With the rapid changes in the built environment, however, "there's no longer anywhere for the returning dead to go" (110). The town in which they lived is no more. These dead comprise a haunting, shuffling presence beneath the bright lights and chrome fixtures of the new city. To anyone but Red, they are to be brushed embarrassedly under the carpet. Their two telling qualities, discovered by the scientists studying them, are that they impart vitality to those around them, and that they have "autonomous viability" (141) – that is, if you cut off a piece of them, that piece will keep living. Through this image the text presents the repercussions of the violence done to what was once a 'living tradition': the undead stand as a sad husk of the erased yet recent past, in their lack of agency, their lack of efficacy and their lack of meaning to the modern town and its inhabitants. The fact that their presence imparts vitality to those around them suggests the lost benefits of the lost social relations and values, while their undead quality, even that of a piece severed from the main body, speaks to the residual and persistent presence of those values under the topsoil of the new disposition.

Just prior to the scene in question, the uncommon connection Red feels to this lost past is illustrated by his reaction to his father's attempt to join Noonan and Red in having a drink (a notably communal activity in the text):

Redrick fell silent and looked at him. Something trembled in his face, and Noonan was amazed to see the most genuine, the most sincere love and affection expressed on that savage freckled mug. (152)

Such a display is exceedingly rare for stoic Red. In the scene that follows, the full baleful impact of the Zone and its effects are brought home in a vignette of what has been lost, what no longer appears to make sense, and the sheer power of the new disposition to—once again—impose a collective forgetting of the social realities hidden beneath the surface of the commodity system:

[...] Monkey silently appeared by the table next to the old man and stood there for a while, putting her furry little paws on the table. Suddenly, in a completely childlike manner, she leaned against the corpse and put her head on his shoulder. And Noonan, continuing to chatter, looked at these two monstrous offspring of the Zone and thought, My Lord, what else do we need? What else has to be done to us, so it finally gets through? Is this really not enough? He knew that it wasn't enough. He knew that billions and billions didn't know a thing and didn't want to know and, even if they did find out, would act horrified for ten minutes and immediately forget all about it. (155)

While this final sentence can be read as a comment on humanity rather than the impersonal and amnesiac nature of commodity relations—and the book has a far from romantic view of humanity in the main—it is only such impersonal relations that allow an easy forgetting of human suffering.<sup>72</sup> Red, on the other hand, is driven to his final quest by the weight of being unable to forget, haunted in the night by

Monkey screaming [...] and his father [...] responding from the other side of the house [...] they kept calling back and forth in the dark—it seemed to last a century, a hundred years, and another hundred years. (163)

Thus do the claims of the past and the future weigh heavily upon the present, and finally push Red to accept the challenge embodied in the Zone and its legendary Golden Ball—of facing up to the realisation that his own actions contribute to the world he so despises, and taking on the responsibility of making his own desires manifest on a grander scale.

### **Utopia, Individualism & Freedom**

By the time of the final scene, a momentous shift has occurred in Red's value-orientation—in his understanding of what is desirable, and of what one could justifiably want or expect from life. This shift leads him to the final utopian plea that closes the book, "HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN!" (193). This reorientation is worth tracking, as its movement and the final lack of its utopian impulse—founded in its ultimately individualistic sense of political agency—capture the difficulties of radical politics in the new millennium, and breaks off where contemporary authors like China Miéville begin, taking up the themes and an intensification of the strategies to address them.

For the majority of *Roadside Picnic*, Red values a notion of highly individualistic freedom, consisting of having money and liberty of movement, and no need to care about the lot of others.<sup>73</sup> Even in his moment of grand utopian speculation, channeling the dreams of Kirill as quoted earlier, the substance of his ideals are thusly bound: "we'll make everyone rich, and we'll fly to the stars, and we'll go wherever we want" (42). His dream of freedom is one in which he is impossibly independent of the social system that surrounds him, where he can be 'his own man', beholden to no one.

By clinging to this stance Red is driven to greater and greater degradations, by what economists would call the 'moral hazard' of the world in which he lives.<sup>74</sup> He initially states that no stalker (though they are but 'crude men' who only care about the money) would deal in the deadly Hell Slime (48), and yet soon after, he finds himself in a position where he sells the stuff to

Raspy and Bony in order to provide for his family (102). As he is pushed into actions that he himself finds unconscionable, he must resort to a shallow philosophy of necessity and selfishness in order to swallow his own deeds: “All for one, only the Lord for all. In our age it’ll do...” (102). Finally, the suffering of his father and daughter forces Red to a realisation:

[...] this self-reliance had always been measured by the amount of money he managed to wrench, wrestle, and wring out of the surrounding indifferent chaos [...] that’s how it would have continued, if he hadn’t found himself in a hole from which no amount of money could rescue him, in which self-reliance was utterly pointless. (164)

His pursuit of independence and self-interest—in a kind of hellish inversion of Adam Smith’s famous moral argument for the ‘invisible hand’—served only to recreate, and bind him more surely to, the noxious society he hates. He refuses to acknowledge this, resorting to numbing himself through heavy drinking until, at the very end, the truth bursts through:

[...] my whole life I’ve been dragged by the nose, I kept bragging like an idiot that I do as I like, and you bastards would just nod, then you’d wink at each other and lead my by the nose, dragging me, hauling me, through shit, through jails, through bars... Enough! (182)

Having reached this realisation, Red’s first response is to reproduce precisely the logic he condemns, manifesting as a demand for transactional retribution: “Let them pay for everything, may those bastards suffer, let them eat shit like I did...” (191). But this would solve nothing, especially not the fundamental problems of social organisation. And here Red encounters the impossible demand of the utopian, through history and pointedly so in the contemporary moment, not only to know what one hates, but also what one wants: “No that’s all wrong, Red.

That is, it's right, of course, but what does it actually mean? What do I need? These are curses, not thoughts" (191). These last passages dramatise the apparent impossibility of utopian projection, of being able to *think other than in the accustomed manner*. Red struggles, and questions what 'thinking' is: "to outwit, dupe, pull a con, but none of these are any use here" (190). His idea of thinking—of rationality—is one where you play the game, not change the rules. He bumps up against the classic utopian problem of transforming a total system: "He knew that it all had to be destroyed, and he longed to destroy it, but he could guess that if it were all gone, then there's be nothing left – only flat, bare earth" (192). Destruction is easy but what comes after the rupture? By these steps Red dramatises the process by which one tries to free oneself from the logic of that which one hates, but is then confronted by an open and featureless vista.<sup>75</sup>

In the end, he realises that it is the whole system itself, and the way it determines people's lives, that has to change: "Not one life and not two lives, not one fate and not two fates – every little bit of this stinking world had to change..." (187). This moment of facing up to the responsibility and necessity of larger social change coincides with a tiny but telling detail—for the first time in his life, Red wishes that his flask were filled with water, not alcohol (190). But the details of precisely how remain absent, and the utopian impulse expresses itself most purely and most impractically in his final fairy tale cry for ubiquitous and unimpeded happiness; as Elana Gomel notes "Utopia comes back precisely at the point of its dissolution, but as an unfocused longing rather than as a bureaucratic blueprint" ("Gods" 362). By positing the bridge between individual desire and total transformed reality in the fairy tale shape of a wish-machine (and it's doubtful whether such a bridge would be, in fact, *desirable*, as surely a flattening and ultimately totalitarian implementation), the text points up a fundamental fault at the heart of grand utopian longing. The universal appearance of 'happiness for all', to which everyone can agree, obscures the reality of "an unpleasant swarm of competing and irreconcilable desires", while the utopian programme is left cut in two; "private fantasme on the one hand and practical-political in the

other” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 76). With this conclusion, and the affirmation that the “bitter outcome [of *Roadside Picnic*] is the inevitable reconfirmation of SF’s reality principle” (76) Jameson concludes his investigation of the text’s registering of the utopian impulse. But with his focus on this insurmountable theoretical rupture, he is silent about another small but telling detail earlier in the book, which provides a space in which agency is not automatically overwhelmed by structure, but, following the suggestion of the value-desire circuit, allows agency to be transformed directly *into* structure, and is more aligned with the notions of contemporary politics, that tends to eschew notions of total revolutions. The chapter closes with a discussion of this.

### **Conclusion: A Modest Gesture, A Glimmer of Hope**

Red’s actions throughout are driven primarily by his desire to *make a world* for Monkey, and maintain a place for his father: both are incompatible with (undesired by) the status quo. This desire takes shape in Red’s efforts to shield his home life from the vagaries of the shifting social reality, but most interestingly when Red literally *builds* Monkey a world, out the front of their house. He makes her a wooden slide, a dollhouse, a swing, a bench (71-2; 101). He sees these actions as fruitful because they provide a place for Monkey to play with the local children, who are attracted by the small playground and, as the truism runs, do not see with the prejudiced eyes of adults, and happily accept Monkey. This is interesting in a number of ways. Firstly, here we see Red’s desire intervening in the world, through creative action, in order to materially alter it. This alteration then influences the behavior of others in the world (the children), to his (and their, and of course Monkey’s) benefit. It’s significant of course that it is the world of children that Red here intervenes in, a world that exists under the radar of official structures and entrenched habits. It is also a small and relatively contained world, rather than the sprawling mess of a town, a country, a globe. Finally, it is interesting that the ‘adult’ world intervenes even here—old women sit on the bench and gossip about Monkey, and in a piece of Soviet realism the building

superintendent is always on Red's back about taking the things down, as they are not authorised (71-2). In this relatively autonomous space, the struggle between authority and individual desire and creativity is played out; this, just outside Red's house, is where the 'rubber meets the road', where Red the individual has some power, or at least the obstinacy, to push back.

Clearly, however, this isolated and contained agency is not enough to transform the world, and there is a huge divide between the two utopian moments in the text. But it is important I think not to gloss over it in the theoretical pessimism of the impossibility of the grand utopian gesture, since by focusing on this smaller-scale effort we are allowed to glimpse a space where the 'reality principle' may try to reassert itself, but individual agency and desire is capable of pushing back and altering the meaning of 'reality' in doing so. This agency, so often linked in sf to 'unrealistic' fantasy or fairy tale, needs to be shown as penetrating and shaking up sf, because it is precisely the 'recalcitrant materialism' of sf—its realism—that is ideologically pernicious, and a mode of stomping down agency in favour of the 'reality' of established norms. The ontological disturbance of the Zone and the ambiguity of the ending maintains the openness of the text against an ideological paranoid closure, and facilitates the representation of the emergence of radical and transgressive possibility. But holding the two utopian moments of the text in tension—the grand and the modest—rather than privileging one over the other, opens up the possibility of thinking something in the middle, a process by which the agency required for large-scale transformation should not be a single will or a single coherent and cohered desire, but a collection, or a community. The approach of *Roadside Picnic* as a whole to the representation of agency as such suggests that a discourse of impurity is essential to any attempt to represent the potential to bring something new into existence, to assert new values, and to capture the mechanism by which potential becomes reality, desire becomes meaning, and agency becomes structure which, in turn, produces new agency. While *Roadside Picnic* does not manage to explore this possibility to its fullest extent, it nonetheless signals a set of narrative strategies that make it

available to literary representation, and allow the texts looked at in the following chapters to go further, and fail better.



## 4.

# THE KEFAHUCHI TRACT TRILOGY: REALISM, FANTASY AND COMPROMISE IN THE ETERNAL NEOLIBERAL PRESENT

*The central claim of those who celebrated postmodernism is that we have entered a world in which all totalizing systems [...] have been shattered. [...] One can no longer even imagine that there could be a single standard of value by which to measure things. The neoliberals on the other hand are singing the praises of a global market [...], a totalizing system that would subordinate everything—every object, every piece of land, every human capacity or relationship—on the planet to a single standard of value. It is becoming increasingly obvious that what those who celebrated postmodernism were describing was in large part simply the effects of this universal market system, which, like any totalizing system of value, tends to throw all others into doubt and disarray.*

—David Graeber, *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value*

## Introduction

M. John Harrison's Kefahuchi Tract trilogy (*Light* [2002]; *Nova Swing* [2006]; *Empty Space* [2012])<sup>76</sup> strives to be a cutting critique of both the neoliberal present, and the limitations of the sf genre. However, this chapter will argue that this critique is limited by the trilogy's conceptual horizon of bourgeois individualism and its commitment to an attitude of compromise that ultimately serves to reinforce the status quo against which it sets itself. Further, its bounded perspective makes it impossible to think radical social change, resulting in the abjection of a genuine utopian impulse to the realms of immaturity and fantasy. It will argue that this abjection is the result of the trilogy's connected failure both to think communal agency, and also to escape the gravitational pull of an ontological commitment to the status quo, thanks to a camouflaged commitment to particular discourses of purity.

## The Now and the Near Future

The KT trilogy moves between two timelines: the turn of the second millennium to midway through the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and a far-distant future. From the post-2008-crash vantage point of 2050, the early 2000s are described as a time when the world “was still proud of its future, blown, like its economy, as a stream of bubbles” (E291). A reference to the speculative ‘bubbles’ that swell thanks to the phantasmagoria of finance and burst with devastatingly real consequences, this image is also metonymic with a broader understanding of how utopian fantasies are employed to sustain and reproduce the structures of capitalism. Both the near- and far-future in the trilogy act as critiques of the fantasies that neoliberalism propagates: the near by projecting their disastrous economic, environmental and social consequences; and the far by providing a science-fictionally estranged image of neoliberalism, lurid and exaggerated as if seen in a fun-house mirror. They both dramatise the deleterious social effects of maintaining an ideological blindness to the socio-historical, economic and environmental realities in favour of trumpeted visions of progress, endless growth and technological fixes, and the individual repercussions of sloganeering for self-actualisation and an unbridled freedom of choice done in the service of profit.

By 2050, “[n]o one knew how to blow the next bubble” (E296), and material reality is such that the fantasies can no longer be sustained—public services are breaking down, the TV show *Ice Melt!* is on its 15<sup>th</sup> season (the apocalypse will be televised), and a character named Anna Kearney remembers “when decline and reversal – quick or slow, economic or catastrophic – had seemed like temporary conditions, anomalous and even a little exciting” (E58). In 2050 a stagnant human and declining global condition is the new norm.<sup>77</sup> The economy that develops to suit the time is “cautious, simplified and heavily shifted to the co-operative” (297). All this stands in pointed contrast to the doubling-down on neoliberal policies that has actually occurred since 2008 in the UK and elsewhere, and the continuing push for deregulation seen with trade

agreements like TTIP.<sup>78</sup> While the near-future presented in the KT trilogy is hardly an attractive one, it appears to be one where economic lessons have at least been partially learnt, and humanity appears to have given up the unsustainable fantasies it previously held—“Adults were forced to find new ways of viewing the idea of success; children were having to mature earlier” (E296). The future (a figure for our neoliberal present) provides a stark contrast. It provides, in some ways, a useful and thoughtful critique of neoliberalism, particularly commodity culture, which I will look at below, before considering how the critique is undermined by its ultimately bourgeois horizons.

### **The Far Future (1)— The Tract & The Site**

The far future is dominated by a phenomenon named the Kefahuchi Tract. Like a candle to a moth it has drawn all life and civilisation in the universe to it for untold years, and with much the same result. Described as “a singularity without an event horizon [...] the wrong physics loose in the universe” (L237), the Tract is a *flaw* in the universe, a mark of an unstable ontology—productive, pregnant with potential, and antithetical to established systems of meaning and order. As John Gray notes:

Rather than projecting human meaning into the scheme of things as Kurzweil’s Singularity does—by promising deliverance from decay and death in the manner of monotheistic religion—Harrison’s Tract appears in the form of unsettling epiphanies, which act to disrupt any meaning that human beings may have found or made. (Gray)

Every race that encounters the Tract “couldn’t make anything of an idea like that, but [...] couldn’t stop trying to engage it” (L316). Millions of years of effort by countless extinct or living cultures to crack the problem has resulted in the Beach; a vast stretch of space encircling the

Tract, littered with abandoned technologies, artificial planets and galaxy-scale engineering projects far more advanced and mysterious than human technology. The trauma that the Tract symbolises—the trauma of a contingent reality—is endlessly productive of order, meaning and creativity, just as all this effort is ultimately defeated by the heedless opacity of the Tract. It is the mocking limit of rationality, the mark of a reality pregnant with unforeseen possibility. Unfortunately, as will become clear through the following discussion, the potential of the Tract to open a space for alternative social and conceptual possibilities is suffocated in the trilogy by a thorough naturalisation of a particularly bourgeois approach to the notion of ‘reality’.

As well as the Tract there is the Site—a piece of the Tract that fell to earth to form a troubled and dream-like zone—featured in the second book of the trilogy, *Nova Swing*. It is both real and unreal, both an exaggerated image of the contingency of human existence (down to the quantum level, the particular sf-focus of the trilogy’s ‘science’), and a self-enclosed space of fantasy that captures desire, drawing people away from mundane existence. The Zone of *Roadside Picnic* is its clear precedent, and not only because Harrison opens *Nova Swing* with a quote from that book, “[t]he further into the Zone, the closer to Heaven” (Strugatskys 19). Within the Site, though highly dangerous, “consequences always seemed negotiable—in fact refusable to a degree” (N190), which is a mark, in Harrison’s work, of something framed as escapist fantasy—‘reality’ is what has consequences.<sup>79</sup> While the Site could initially be taken as a referent for the alien *jouissance* of capitalism and commodity production like the Zone, in the end it acts only as a reflection of and figure for consumption fantasies; it’s an image of psychological solipsism and escapism, and lacks, in contrast to *Roadside Picnic*, the potential to figure a space in the narrative to think radical social change. People are taken into the Site by travel agents “on a promise of more than they could have”; ultimately, “there’s something in there, but it’s nothing” (N57).<sup>80</sup> The Site presents as a monstrous collection of commodities: toasters and other household objects looming gigantic in the distance, flocks of shoes eddying in the air, and so on. “It was a

hypermarket of the meaningless”, one character states, “in which the only mistake [...] was to have shopping goals” (N198).

With this in mind, the reactions of people to the Site can be better understood. Most visitors to the Site who engage the ‘travel agent’ Vic Serotonin’s services do not even want to enter it:

*Fuck me while I look at it.* In the end that was what most of his clients wanted. They never got any further than the Lots. They had sex with you in open view of the thing out there—as if that was how they understood it; not as a state of affairs but as a live thing, perhaps even a conscious thing, they wanted it to be watching when they came. (N166)

Sex here is essentially masturbation—the female clients don’t care about Vic and “didn’t speak on the way back” (N166). In Harrison’s work there are always people masturbating or convalescing post-indulgence while looking at something significant but made utterly banal, like a picture of Jesus, or a corpse.<sup>81</sup> These scenes are always tawdry affairs. The desire of these characters is engaged, as with the Site, by the apparent *significance* of the thing they are staring at, its promise (and deferral) of meaning. In this way it is metonymic with the promise of meaning and fulfilment, and the capture of desire, occasioned by commodities. But unlike the Zone, there is no clash of value-systems here, no socio-economic or structural changes. The Site, the Tract, and the trilogy itself, register upon their surface only the individuated inner-lives of the characters, and lack any real sense of the social and productive relations from which those inner-lives spring.

## **Far Future (2)—The Neoliberal Present as Future**

Against the economic lessons learnt in the near future timeline, the far future has reverted to neoliberal type, and seems set for a catastrophic replay. “The boys from Earth” (as Harrison titles them [E141], reminiscent of a group of city-bankers on tour, pumped full of testosterone and money and devoid of scruple) have managed to make it to the cosmic scrapheap of the Beach, where alien salvage is always up for grabs and techno-science leaps forward exponentially:

For the boys from Earth their arrival on the Beach was a game-changer. Anything could now happen. In the tidewrack of alien refuse, new universes awaited [...] the Beach was an interregnum, a holiday from common sense, an exuberant celebration of the very large and the very small, of the very old and the very new, of the vast, extraordinary, panoramic instant they congratulated themselves on living in: the instant in which everything that went before somehow met and became confected with everything yet to be. It was the point where the known met the unknowable, the mirror of desire. It was, in short, a chance to make some money. (E141)

Note the apparent timelessness of the moment, the dream-like way that past, present and future are all ‘confectured’ together, and yet how it all boils down to desire and making money. The future presented in the KT trilogy is the postmodern moment of rampant commodity culture apotheosised:

Everything was waiting to be handled, smelled, eaten. You threw the rind over your shoulder. The eerie beauty of it was that you could be on to the next thing before the previous thing had lost its shine. (E194-5)

A simultaneous death of, and yearning for, authenticity is the norm. A police bureau is “sprayed recently to smell of authentic furniture wax” (NS127), an apartment building “designed to have an ambience of shiny brown paintwork and roach smells in the passageways” (E18), a sink on which “a permanent limescale stain had been artfully added at the point of manufacture” (NS187)—the entire culture is one of simulation, everything is a “cheap repro” (NS136). People drink Black Heart Rum, talk on Bakelite telephones (NS38), decorate in retro socialist chic and dance to the absurdly named ‘old New Nuevo Tango’: it’s a familiar new old mess, a kind of madness where the past is privileged over the future to the detriment of the present, and a dual craving for the impression of authenticity *and* novelty has led to the dislocation of meaning from lived experience. To drive the Jamesonian point home further, one of the character names is Bonaventura, a call-back to the Westin Bonaventure Hotel.<sup>82</sup>

The people of the future are also commodified—even so far removed there still appears to be No Alternative—and the search for authenticity continues at the level of personal identity. As well as custom genetic ‘cuts’ for Earth Military Contracts (EMC) operatives or those who can afford it, there are a number of off-the-peg genetic packages and ‘one-shot’ cultivars; Fighters—muscular with a giant cock, tusks and spurs—Monas (a Marilyn Monroe copy)—supposedly ‘sex on a stick’, often the package of choice for prostitutes; Annies—who run rickshaws, are built (actually) like a horse and die at a young age; other, less featured ones, that promise variously “the genius of Michael Jackson, the looks of Albert Einstein, the nourishing spiritual intelligence of Paul Coelho” (NS47). The implicit bite here (apart from the obvious sarcasm) is making visible the hollow promise of identity-transformation that has always been implicit in the seductive power of commodities, only now raised to the surface to be plainly packaged and sold. Appearance and even temperament (the Mona package comes with a ‘heart of gold’ option that helps with the job) can be switched easily, which would lead, one would imagine, to a breakdown

in notions of essential identity, and a freedom of experimentation that would push the bounds of human experience. Instead, the future has run out of steam:

In a time like that, who needed a circus? The halo was a circus in itself. Circus was in the streets. It was inside people's heads [...]. Everyone had geek genes and a story to tell [...]. It was the flight into the grotesque. The tusked cultivar on Electric Avenue, the twink curled foetally in the twink-tank: whether they knew it or not, they had asked and answered all the questions the universe could support for now. They were their own audience, too. (L168)

The reason for this faltering is obvious, and bears a direct relationship to actual neoliberal reality in the new millennium. This is no true grotesque, but rather a superficially differentiated homogeneity. Remembering the epigraph to this chapter, the seemingly wild postmodern relativism and variation, and breakdown of notions of essence and grand narratives that dominated ideas about the postmodern era at its height is nothing more than the cultural effect of the single largest and most encompassing value system and grand narrative that has ever existed—the global market. There is no genuine innovation at the fundamental level of social relations, and all the superficial differences are fundamentally *effects of the market* and the demands of capital accumulation for novelty. There may be a selection of identities on offer, but they centre around the brute nodal points of labour (Annie), violence (Fighters) and sex (Mona), and *all* are ultimately determined by labour, by an individual need for income combined with the demands of the market. Further, the novel utilises the interchangeable quality of the off-the-peg identities to further disorient the reader, as, for example, a Mona in one scene may or may not be that in the next.<sup>83</sup> The variety of 'transformative' identities on offer are thus "a difference that works itself out within sameness" (N94), and that sameness is their role as circumscribed by the



demands of capital. The ability (and ‘freedom’—that of the wage labourer) to choose a personality and appearance that not only perfectly suits your job but in a sense *makes you into your job* is painfully close to real-life neoliberal discourses around conceiving the individual as “a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business” (Gershon 537). The guiding principles of such rational action are, of course, the demands of the market itself, signaling the fluctuating desires of the consuming public. The fighters, for example, are “less than real, an in-the-end pointless looping of their personal dreams into parity with some sort of public idea of what a fighter ought to resemble” (N97). Perhaps the clearest depiction of this repetition of the same, much like in *Iron Man 3*, where Stark made iterations of himself over and over again, is Uncle Zip, the enormously wealthy gene tailor. He represents the capitalist in the trilogy, and makes his money selling fantasies of transformation to others, which are ultimately determined by the market, and that fundamental homogeneity is highlighted by the fact that in *Light* we discover he spends his evenings holding court to a room of young clones of himself. Even the capitalist reproduces himself (or maybe that should be *especially* the capitalist). He dies, but by *Nova Swing* and *Empty Space*, the Beach is strewn with Uncle Zip franchises, like an entrepreneurial elaboration of his taste for cloning himself, all offering the same homogenising packages peddling a false diversity.

To round out the image of second-millennium real-life neoliberalism, the far-future is not governed by democratic societies, but by states subordinate to the military-industrial complex EMC, while, recalling Suvin’s and Miéville’s notion of a capitalist science hitched to profit, science appears focused on engineering and applied technology. Like the science of *Roadside Picnic*, it is a matter of ‘beachcombing’: mining the alien salvage “until it ran out” (L198) in the pursuit of profit and military advantage. Finally, in this accumulative rush reminiscent of other, real-life mineral rushes, or even speculative bubbles like the dot-com boom, the far future

economy is a “cowboy economy” (L139), puffed up on desire and fantastic promises, and bound to collapse into war or crisis once the easy growth runs out.

The built environment of the far future also resonates with critiques of the ‘dream-worlds’ of neoliberalism, where the physical disembedding of the elite from the surrounding social relations, through construction of gated communities or private highways, make material the conceptual disembedding of them as a class from the society, nation and even culture in which they live (Davis & Monk). While the future plot mainly takes place in the grime and neon of the planet New Venusport’s less salubrious hemisphere (rich and poor are zoned to this half-a-planet extreme), those better off live in commodified corporate enclaves which

constructed themselves as little market towns called Saulsignon, Burnham Overy or Brandett Hersham, featuring stone churches and water meadows under blue rainwashed skies, perfect windy weather and ponies on the green (E262).

Simulacra of a particular tradition and authenticity (reminiscent of a Tory safe-seat) dominate as the chosen commodified aesthetic of the rich: “The retro lifestyles emerging from the corporate enclaves had less historical accuracy [...] but a softer, more buyable feel” (L169). In connection, back in the near-future, a character called Anna lives in the village of Wyndlesham (sham!), a type of place familiar to any British person, which “while it yearned for vanished values, [...] had long ago priced out any representative of them” (E83).

Capital thrives off such pseudo-utopian fantasies and enclaves—both in the text and in our mundane reality. Mark Bould makes the point about entertainment under capital, which can be generalised to usefully connect consolatory and escapist fantasy of all stripes to the mode of production that provides it and thrives on it:

The inadequacies of a society produce historically- and culturally-specific needs that are nonetheless real needs [...] entertainment provides utopian solutions—a sense of abundance, energy, intensity, transparency, community—to the inadequacies and inequities produced by capitalism. However, not only does entertainment do nothing to rid us permanently of scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation and fragmentation, but it also focuses on those ‘gaps or inadequacies in capitalism [...] that capitalism proposes itself to deal with’ [...] The needs which are met by capital are real needs; the solutions with which capital meets them are partial, local and short-term. (Bould “Let’s make a little noise” 16)

The KT trilogy is in part an investigation of the insufficiency of these manufactured solutions, and the suffering they both mask and cause. Harrison brands the majority of sf and fantasy as a “cynically engineered extension of this daydream offered by market-driven publishing houses” (*Parietal Games* 150). Such fantasies are “*comforters*, part opiate, part masturbation [...] pandering to disturbed and uncomfortable children, supplying catharsis by feeding back their own fears and desires” (Harrison, *Parietal Games* 39). This image of a closed feedback loop of desire between culture and consumer reveals itself to be the topology of both the ‘closed loop’ of the futuristic ‘cut’ fighters and monas, matched to the public’s expectations of them, and popular cinema such as *Iron Man 3*. The fighters and monas are a symbolic critique of the exaggerations and imaginations of a fantasy literature that all too often provides nothing but the expected, dressed up for effect—brave men, pretty women, evil Others.

The trilogy takes aim at consolatory fantasy particularly in the key manifestations of individual escapism, nostalgia, and a notion of ‘home’; connected desires that were deployed to persuade by the texts under analysis in the previous two chapters. In the KT trilogy, the picture is more complex. The stories of Serai Mau and Anna Kearney, two of the key protagonists of the

trilogy, are instructive of how the novels describe the pernicious effects of escapism on the individual (escapism, on the one hand, into a kind of sf day-dream, and on the other into the day-dream of bourgeois security). However, this attack is undermined by the trilogy's refusal to consider, not only the positive potential of fantasy for individual identity, but also the basic necessity of fantasy in identity construction as such. In doing so, it is forced to fall back on an unexamined notion of an 'essential' identity, which has the effect of limiting potential subjectivities to those produced by subordination of self to dominant discourses of what 'reality' is in the first place—purity discourses, in other words. Similarly, while the trilogy also appears to go some way towards overtly rejecting nostalgia as unproductive and harmful, and undermining the idea of 'home' as a stable point of safety and identity that one can return to, ultimately it is undone by its own reliance on, and reproduction of, a thoroughly nostalgic, bourgeois individualism—in this it is close to the ideological work done by *Iron Man 3*. Finally, as I will show, the trilogy works, against its own apparent political motivations, to close down the possibility of imagining radical political alternatives through, on the one hand, valorising a 'realistic' attitude of compromise over that of a purportedly immature idealism, and on the other, (akin to *Roadside Picnic*) failing to grasp and represent agency beyond the scope of the atomised individual.<sup>84</sup> I'll take these themes one at a time.

### **Serai Mau & Anna Kearney: The Illusion of a True Self**

Her mother dead, Serai Mau is driven to leave home at thirteen by her father's inability to overcome his grief, which results in his trying to replace wife with daughter. Unable to come to terms with her situation, she takes an irreversible step and fulfils a youthful dream of escape, submitting to the intensive surgeries required to become a K-captain, making her consciousness symbiotic with, and her body forever dependent upon, her K-ship, the 'coolest' and most advanced military technology in the universe. 'Becoming' a ship has pedigree in the history of sf.

Perhaps the most pertinent progenitor here is Anne McCaffrey's famous collection *The Ship Who Sang*, featuring Helva, a woman who 'becomes' a ship.<sup>85</sup> While Helva finds the experience liberating, Harrison here undermines the trope as a way of embodying and thus exposing the consequences of escapism, and a particular type of fantasy—one of power and the technological sublime—that fuels sf.

Harrison consistently plays with the 'cool' factor of the K-ships (and with sf tropes in general) by clashing their science-fictional sensibilities with the realities of mundane human needs, undermining the apparent desirability of the former. This ranges from a long description of a dog-fight—empty sf action-patter delivered with cutting irony (E236-7)—to descriptions of them on a rescue mission, where they “looked wrong – like a lot of executioners at a birthday party, with an intense interest in people's weight or how muscular their necks were” (E238). All they are good for is destruction—they are monstrous, and to desire them is to desire something monstrous.<sup>86</sup> In our very first encounter with Mau, she uses her K-ship, the *White Cat*, to destroy a civilian passenger ship in a gratuitous display of violence that underscores the psychopathic lack of human empathy and sense of consequence that can be detected in much typical sf.<sup>87</sup> The name of the destroyed ship, *La Vie Féerique* (L9), 'Fairy Life', is surely a pointed statement of intent on Harrison's part: to destroy such cosy fantasies is part of the purpose of the character, if not the trilogy as a whole.

The true horror of the situation only emerges when we understand fully the consequences of Mau's escapism. She has fled into a terrible captivity, stuck irreversibly in a tank on-board her ship, which, in a sledgehammer allegory, is “decorated with gold mouldings of elves, unicorns and dragons, all making heroic self-sacrifices over and over again, as if death wasn't a permanent state and heartbreak could always be risen above” (L306). Note again the dig at the deceptive lack of consequence or risk in fantasy, because inside the tank lies the awful reality—a physical manifestation of the consequences of escapism:

this small, broken, yellowish thing, its limbs all at odd angles, curling and uncurling itself feebly against the pain of the open air. What she heard as a scream of horror and despair was only a faint rough groan. The skin stretched over her like the tanned or preserved skin of a bog-burial. There was no flesh between that and the bones beneath. The withered lips drew back over small, even teeth. The eyes glared out of tarry sockets. When she saw the thick cables trailing from the core-points in the scholiosed spine, she felt numb and disgusted. She felt the most awful pity for that thing. She felt the most awful shame. (L307)

This heavy, lingering description sits underneath the trilogy as a gratuitous warning. While Mau appears very powerful in her ship, it is a defensive shell that reveals at the slightest provocation a deeply frightened child beneath it (L149; L193, L254), whose reason for becoming a K-Ship appears to be for its strength, its utter difference from a powerless little girl. For Harrison, escapism is a defence; a refusal to engage with reality and with other people, which leads, for him, to being emotionally stunted, undeveloped, immature (*Parietal Games* 39; 84-92). This metaphor of the withered body inside the ship, however, suggests that there is some 'essential' self that retards through escapism, and does not allow for the opposite, constructive possibility and potential of fantasy in creating new subjectivities.

At the end of *Light*, Mau is freed from her bondage to the ship (and her body), and transformed into what appears to be an entity of pure will, "so huge and yet so frail, so perpetually emergent from its own desires" (L309). She can now become anything she wants, but this does not make her happy. Released from her physical prison, she enters the trap of infinite choice and freedom. Such freedom is meaningless, like the boundless agency found in fairy tales or heroic fantasy, untempered by resistance from historico-material conditions. Meaning, as

Graeber claims, comes from the making real or making material of desire, which in turn requires a social context. Moreover, to cling to the idea that ‘I can be anything I want to be’ is itself the most pernicious form of neoliberal fantasy, one that is consistently exposed as such in the trilogy. However, here again, the utopian charge of the notion of ‘becoming-other’, of a radical recreation of self and subjectivity is completely suppressed. At the end Mau states: “I can be anything I want [...] but I don’t want that. I want to be the one thing I am” (E288). This notion of being ‘true to oneself’ rings a false note in the trilogy, and obscures the actual operation of such a discourse, which is to discipline the individual to dominant and essentialised notions of subjectivity—the idea being that a ‘true’ self is one which has come to accept ‘reality’ as such, thus producing subjectivities that in turn act to reproduce the status quo, and add more weight to the purity discourses that sustain both in tandem.

The same ideological stance can be seen to underpin the character of Anna. Anna Selve, become Anna Kearney, wife of Michael Kearney, in *Light*, become Anna Waterman, wife of the now-deceased Tim Waterman, in *Empty Space*, is a woman who “had been lost all her life and was never going to find herself now” (L87). By the close of the near future timeline, in 2050, Anna Waterman has lived a life and raised a girl named Marnie to womanhood. She lives a comfortable but alienated middle-class existence alone in a house in the well-off village of Wyndlesham, and sees a psychiatrist, Helen Alper, through whom we get descriptions of Anna’s predicament in clinical terms:

The client, her personality frozen in adolescence, had disguised herself as an adult for the duration of her marriage to Tim Waterman [...] She had effectively erased the abjection of her life with her first husband, yet remained bound to it, and through it to the unthought known. (E213)

Anna Waterman had reinvented herself with the century: now she was discovering that Anna Selve remained the disordered substrate beneath it all. (E27)

It appears that Anna's 'grown-up' self was an act, a construction that psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott might have termed a 'False Self'—a defensive façade that could leave the individual lacking spontaneity and passion behind a mere appearance of being 'real'. This is in contrast to a 'True Self' which Winnicott understood as premised on spontaneous authentic experience and expression, generating a feeling of being truly alive, and 'real' (see Winnicott). *Empty Space* can then be understood to track the demise of Anna's False Self, in a seeking for circumstances in which to express her True Self.

It is worth noting here, for the sake of the later discussion, that the most prominent symbol of Anna's identity troubles is Anna's home. Asked to imagine her perfect place she describes an "idealised version" of the summerhouse at the bottom of her garden, a place she considers 'authentic'. (E86). Her house itself is another matter. A new build that hasn't aged, the only character lies in the vestiges of a previous, "more authentic dwelling." It's "lent" life by birds in the spring, "still looking like an architectural drawing, it hadn't weathered." Described as "a cheap toy abandoned on a carpet; something unable to age because of the sheer purposive artificiality of the materials used to construct it" with "furniture that had aged but somehow never gained character. Clothes she no longer wore. A car she never drove. It was less a house than a place to store things" (E84).

Again, while this narrative, and particularly given Anna's material circumstances, on the one hand is a critique of the fantasy life of the bourgeois—the life that lacks authenticity and spontaneity—the critique is built upon the privileging of 'getting to grips with reality' as such, and through this of 'being true to yourself' (note the idea of the 'sheer purposive artificiality' of the materials used to construct the house/False Anna), rather than any understanding of social



relations and identities as *always* both constructed and constructing, and that imagined alternatives can be brought into being. For all its literary subtlety, and for all Harrison's public arguments to the contrary (see Cramer), the trilogy fundamentally privileges a notion of an essentialised but vaguely defined 'reality' as distinct and separable from that of an artificial 'fantasy'. The distinction between 'reality' and 'fantasy' in the novels appears to hinge on fuzzy notions of whether or not one 'engages with other people', 'lives in the present' and 'accepts the reality of things'—all of which can be understood, despite certain refinements which will be discussed, as purity discourses—claims as to the ontological truth of things that smuggle in value-judgements and hierarchies—which serve the interests of the status quo in maintaining cultural norms and delimiting acceptable subjectivities. I'll turn now to the trilogy's treatments of nostalgia and 'home', which will build on these ideas.

## Nostalgia

Fat Antoyne and Liv Hula live in the city of Saudade; as blunt a metaphor for nostalgia as one could wish for.<sup>88</sup> They lead, at the beginning of *Nova Swing*, stagnant lives of quiet desperation disconnected from the world as a result of their aspirations to *return*, impossibly, to what they once were—a kind of nostalgic longing for a time and an identity "both remembered and unreal" (N80).

They are mostly found at 'Black Cat White Cat', Liv's rather shabby bar downtown, near the edge of the Site. Neither can, initially, seem to break away from this monotonous life, and spend their days privately dwelling on their past lives and loves—back when Ant was a low-grade smuggler, back when Liv was a young entradista, sleeping with the legendary Chinese Ed and beating him to hyperdip records.<sup>89</sup> Liv "would have dreams of some other planet, from which she always woke thinking, 'Where was that? I had a better time there'" (N61). They both fit well

with one character's statement that "everyone she encountered in those days was trying to live out some dream already irretrievable when they were sixteen" (N59).

Eventually, thanks in large part to Ant falling into a relationship with Irene the Mona, they manage to take practical action to shape their futures: "None of us is anyone any more. We all lost who we were. But we can all be something else" (N237). They team up, Liv sells the bar, and the three of them buy the ship 'Nova Swing' and start a slightly dodgy haulage business. Liv's statement that they have 'lost' who they were and can be 'something else' is shown to be a little hyperbolic, since their new lives are less glamorous remakes of their longed-for pasts, with Liv as a pilot of a bucket-ship rather than a thrilling hyperdip, and Ant a cargo hauler, pretty much the same as before. The novel makes it very clear that making a new, but realistic and achievable future, is a matter of taking stock of limits and abilities, including one's own. The trajectory of Ant and Liv in *Nova Swing* is one of initially failing to confront their situation, but which takes a (very minor) redemptive turn when they assert their agency to change their own contexts. They become, in the inscription of their personal desires onto the shape of material reality, somewhat aspirational figures, through an understanding of themselves, their situation, and the possibilities within reach. But the problem with this becomes visible when we consider Red's similar small-scale agency in *Roadside Picnic*. Red's effort, while minor, was one that remade social reality, and *changed* social relations to a more utopian form—it created new possibilities. Further, it was done *against* the wishes of the status quo (figured by the building superintendent). Liv and Ant in comparison are 'realistic' to a fault: their understanding of what is 'possible' is strictly limited to the scope offered by compromise (presented in the novel as entirely proper) with the world as-it-is. This "resignation and the spirit of compromise;" this alleged "ability to distinguish between the possible and the impossible, with the accompanying serenity to accept those limitations imposed by reality" is a major feature of the bourgeois attitude, particularly as presented in the classic bourgeois novels, which have often been interpreted as novels of

compromise (Vazsonyi 29). What is key here, and has been key to the thesis as a whole, is that the division between the possible and the impossible is defined in large part by power, and sustained by ideology—the ‘reality’ that imposes limits is not some ontological given, but a constructed and malleable social arrangement, like the centre ground so beloved of post-ideological politics. To simply accept the status quo and compromise is arguably better than mere escapism, but in turn it can be seen as a form of escapism itself—to rest at ‘what is’, and not push through to ‘what could be’. To privilege such an attitude, and to reinforce it through comparison with puerile escapism, or seductive nostalgia, rather than a genuine utopian impulse, is to perform the ideological work of shoring up the status quo, and to maintain the politically important division between conceptions of the possible/impossible.

What truly condemns the apparent sincerity with which the novels privilege this ‘realistic’ attitude is that it is asserted in a reality underpinned by the total ontological instability figured by the Tract and the Site. The open potential of both is dismissed as simply the ‘unknown’ and thus a “mirror of desire” (E141). The Tract both *is* the fundamental truth of unknowable reality, and also merely a screen upon which desire plays, reflecting the desirer back to themselves. This classic sf aporia—that of the existence of genuine otherness, but combined with humanity’s inability to actually experience anything but a projection of itself (*Solaris* is the canonical text for this, though much of Lem’s novels engage with the idea)<sup>90</sup>—functions in the KT trilogy to limit imaginative possibilities rather than expand them, as a *flaw* is capable of doing. Desires and successful efforts to satisfy them are not permitted, in the trilogy, to escape the gravitational pull of what is presented as mundane ‘reality’ (in and of itself an unacknowledged fantasy), and if they do, they are branded solipsistic fantasy, and pernicious—a policing of the normative line akin to neoliberal or capitalist ‘realism’, and the tarring of political alternatives as ‘ideological’, ‘utopian’, ‘unrealistic’ and bringing dire consequences. This division is reinforced through the trilogy by means of subtle purity discourses which, in turn, operate through the comparing of the banal but

positive outcomes of a ‘realistic’ attitude with the negative results of ‘fantasy’ attitudes: Liv and Ant as opposed to Serai Mau, Edith as opposed to Vic, Marnie as opposed to Anna. Perhaps the most innocuous but telling sign of the trilogy’s failure of imagination in terms of the enactment of social change lies in the fact that of the positive outcomes, Liv and Ant succeed by starting a business; Edith succeeds by starting a business; and Marnie succeeds through her career in finance (albeit the milder 2050 form). These are the paths to success illuminated by a grip on what ‘reality’ has to offer as it stands. The deployment of the concept of ‘home’ in the trilogy provides a final clear example of the normative pressures being exerted.

### **Home / Heimat**

On the one hand, the trilogy does refuse the idea of home as a place metonymic with a stable and essential identity as such, as found in both *Iron Man 3* and *Roadside Picnic*: it makes ‘home’, properly, into a process, a thing that must be continually made and remade. On the other hand, the particular process presented is, again, one of acceptance and compromise with reality ‘as it is’, that stands in contrast to the more properly utopian Blochian notion of home as *Heimat*. This latter is to be understood as:

[...] an anticipated state of reconciliation with conditions of possibility that do not as yet exist, and indeed will not exist until present conditions have been radically reconceptualized so that they can be transformed into something yet impossible to define.  
(Daniel 59)

It is not something that can be returned to, but neither is it something that can be found in the present. It must be made through *transformation of the present conditions*, and could, as such, be understood as akin to cognition. Fantasy—that which is not—is crucial to the process. Home

“needed to be invented through imagination and dreaming [...], [it] does not designate an ontological state of being. It is continuously emerging” (Hüppauf & Umbach 15).<sup>91</sup> This understanding of home-as-process, as utopian and “necessarily geared to the future” (Freedman, “Marxism, Cinema” 80) is in blunt contrast with the notion of home-as-process figured in the novels. In this, as in general, the trilogy replicates the old antagonism between Romantic and bourgeois attitudes, where the Romantics searched for a sense of belonging and home elsewhere, elsewhen, while the bourgeois approach was “resignation and compromise [in] contentedly making earth their home” (Vazsonyi 29-30).

Two examples are worth looking at here. Firstly, and briefly, there is the experience of Mona, who left her childhood home many years ago to travel the stars. Following a traumatic experience, she demands to be taken back, in search of comfort. Her old town has been destroyed by war, and as the text states:

The things she missed about this town were gone. They had never been here anyway. They had vanished not into the current disaster, but years ago, into her own. The past wasn't real but it was all she had: that's how you feel when your life has faltered. (E193)

The longing for a ‘return’ to an unchanged, remembered home is here revealed bluntly to be a comforting retreat in times of need, but one that is pure fantasy—the ideal thing sought was never there in the first place. More interesting is the experience of a character known only as the Assistant.

A teenage male fantasy and a stereotype of generic sf, the Assistant is “something fixed up by cutters with an adolescent view of the future” (E108): a sexy, tuned-up female ‘badass’ for the cover of a mass-market paperback.<sup>92</sup> Like many in the trilogy, she doesn’t know who she is, but she is the most extreme manifestation of that affliction, and cannot be said to have, or possibly

ever to have had, an identity, or a home, a personality, or a sense of what she values and desires. As such her relation to these things is like a test case, in that it resides wholly within the realm of fantasy, as differentiated from ‘reality’ in the trilogy. After work she begins to visit the twink-farms to indulge in a fantasy of herself as ‘Joan’, a rather mundane housewife in the 1950s.

The Assistant and her domestic fantasy make obvious the conceptual link between the nostalgia of the 1950s and the retrograde consolation of generic, adolescent sf, of the type discussed previously with reference to *Iron Man 3*. As I argued, the 1950s is an idealised golden age and prime touchstone for US nostalgia and a national sense of identity. Adolescent sf fantasies perform the ideological work of extending the comforting ideals of the 50s into the future, and the nostalgic past and projected future are together deployed as an ideological short-circuiting of the realities of the present, keeping it forever at bay—an idealised past projected into the future strives to make impossible any critical evaluation of the present.

The Assistant’s fantasy world doesn’t last. The reality of the falsehood of Joan’s life, the threadbare quality of escapist fantasy soon shows. Towards the middle of *Empty Space*, the Assistant has a disturbing experience in the tank; a dream where she is downstairs in the kitchen on a weekend, and her nice, clean possessions have been replaced by “stale wrapped sandwiches and bits of half-eaten fruit.” She feels “disgust and anxiety.” (E135). She is worried that her husband might see them. But the whole, pristine fantasy of the 50s house is falling apart: the house is “weed-filled”, damp penetrates the “cheap formica cabinets, covering them with fibrous ring-shaped blemishes.” (E135). What is made clear in this scene is that the fantasy of the 50s ‘home’ is a composite of essentialised relations and subjectivities—concepts of husband and wife, family, patriarchy, a particular public/private blend, a particular morality and a specific relation to the labour market—constructed and maintained in an artificial stability through purity discourses, and which, as in *Iron Man 3* and *Roadside Picnic*, is connected to constructing an essentialised sense of identity and social values. In the corruption of the sanctity and purity of her

fantasy concept of home by these emblems of impurity, the constructed identity of the Assistant is also being ruptured, exposed as an ideological construction designed to obfuscate and elide those elements of experience that threaten to rupture the status quo—that is, desires that transgress the current order of things. The dream continues with a large, distorted baby with a clearly adult vagina emerging from the wall. In a piece of painful comedy, Joan is ‘embarrassed’ and concerned, amongst this hallucinatory scene, with “how awful it would be if [her husband, Alan] came in and saw the vulva in the kitchen wall” (E136). It is time for their Saturday morning routine, which captures their impotent ideal love (their love that is as pure and fragile and inoffensive as glass, and again, which covers over the potentially transgressive elements of sexual desire—transgressive to the dominant normative notions of the 50s that is). Alan would surprise her while she was making her cakes, and “He would put his arms around her, rub a little, bunch up her skirt, then shoot helplessly while he was still trying to slip into her clean underwear from behind. ‘Oh!’ Joan would tell him, ‘I do love our times together’” (E136)—note the lack of penetration, the detail of her ‘clean’ underwear; purity brooks no contamination. But this morning, as they both stare at the baby with the adult vulva, there is an unearthing of the repressed libido and the grime that must be hidden to maintain this unrealistic dream of purity. They realise that losing that defence is a process of maturity, “just a kind of loss everyone went through” (E136). After that “Joan said vile things. Alan pulled her skirt up and fucked ’til they were both red and sore” (E136).

This passage is an example of how the trilogy appears to reject a nostalgic or ideal notion of ‘home’, and of ‘identity’, but again, only in favour of a notion of ‘maturity’ and acceptance of ‘reality’ that works to infantilise fantasy, and to privilege a notion of compromise. The point, it seems, is that fantasy is empty and shallow compared to the richness and complications of reality—the former simply cannot hold back the creeping tide of the latter, and eventually a ‘coming to terms’ will be forced. Again, this privileges a notion of ‘reality’ against that of an

infantile ‘fantasy’. One of the most serious consequences of this approach is that the trilogy, despite its science-fictional character, and its far future setting, is unable to think beyond the neoliberal present in which it was composed. By withholding the notion of future completely from its frame, the trilogy presents an alternative of, on the one hand, a negative approach to life which involves either ‘living in the past’ by means of nostalgia, or ducking the present by means of a solipsistic escapism. These two often bleed into each other. On the other hand it presents a positive approach to life, which is that of ‘living in the present’. While the trilogy appears to critique the reader’s neoliberal present in fact it thoroughly reinforces the limitations that neoliberalism imposes on political imagination, because the only alternatives thinkable within the trilogy are escapism/past or reality/present—*there is no future* and as such no room for political alternatives, and no possibility of change since every example of imagining otherwise is *presented as negative*. Thus, in opposition to the pernicious fantasy-life of neoliberalism, the novels are unable to offer an insightful alternative. Instead, they rehearse the old contrast between Romantic dreams of impossible things and a bourgeois compromise, and privilege the supposed ‘realism’ of the latter.

### **Therapeutic Closure, Individual Agency, Marnie & Helen**

In its critique of the insufficiencies of the sf genre, the trilogy ends up primarily as a vehicle for describing psychological depth and the subjective experiences of individuals, occluding the possibility of a change to the social and cultural circumstances that produce such specific notions of depth or subjectivity. For all its other qualities, the trilogy must here be judged fundamentally at fault from a radical political perspective. As Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey have argued, “fiction and realism are not the concepts for the production of literature but on the contrary the notions produced by literature” (287), which means that



the real referent ‘outside’ the discourse which both fiction and realism presuppose [functions] as an effect of the discourse. So, the literary discourse itself institutes and projects the presence of the ‘real’ in the manner of an hallucination. (287-8)

Thus the work of literature “produces simultaneously a reality-effect and a fiction-effect, emphasising each by each in turn but always on the basis of their dualism” (287). The fiction-effect of the KT trilogy is felt in the outré sf aesthetics of its supporting cast, its future-tech, its surrealist landscapes and especially the Tract itself. Its accompanying reality-effect (here to be distinguished from Barthes’ famous definition) lies, I propose, in the psychology of its characters, and the limited range of agency that is apparently granted to them—from escapism to compromise, with anything more radical occluded as unrealistic. Despite the *appearance* of a problematised ontology provided by the Tract, and the Site, and despite the formal refusal of closure that the trilogy strives for—through constant uncertainty of identity, uncertainty of motive, through the inexplicable phenomenon of the Aleph<sup>93</sup>, the Site and the Tract, through not tying up all the narrative loose ends—nonetheless the trilogy is completely bounded by a horizon of individual psychology. It is on this level that the trilogy falls prey to an ideological drive to closure, in that it simply cannot think beyond a highly bourgeois notion of individualism, compromise, and a weak optimism as opposed to a communal agency and revolutionary drive.

It’s important here to be precise: to speak of Harrison’s characters as having ‘psychological depth’ is to mistake an effect for a reality; the novel *conjures* the impression of psychological depth. Further, the impression is of a particular *type* of psychological depth—one of conflict, frustration and insecurity. It is the depth of a specific atomised and alienated individual, a particular socio-historical manifestation of the helpless individual under capitalism, whose very sense of individualism is both the cause and the effect of that helplessness. Thus the ‘reality effect’ of Harrison’s characters is one that ‘institutes and projects’ the atomised individual as a universal

human type. It may be argued that Harrison portrays accurately the individual under capital, rather than a universal individual, and so he does, but the lack of any horizon beyond that of capital within the text (other than the impossible and unappealing utopia of charismatic aliens, which I'll come to) has the effect of universalising or essentialising the particular type of individual here portrayed—the bourgeois individual.

To repurpose a comment by Mark Bould (“The Dreadful Credibility”), the KT trilogy is a therapeutic fantasy, not a political one. This conclusion is strongly suggested by the trilogy’s closing focus on the characters of Marnie, Anna’s daughter, and Helen Alper, the psychologist. Particularly it is suggested by the presentation of Marnie as having a pragmatic and sensible grip on her life and the world around her—and the way in which the text valorises this as the best possible condition to hope for—and the immediately following (and trilogy ending) epiphany of Helen Alper (again, that ‘reality’ must be come to terms with), that brings her in line with Marnie’s attitude.

Marnie is the child of Anna Kearney and her second husband, and is presented as the missing heart of the final book in the trilogy, *Empty Space*. The book opens with a mention of her as “thirteen and already unfathomable” (E1) to Anna. But apart from the odd brief mention, she barely appears until the penultimate scene of the whole trilogy. The preceding three novels laid groundwork of shifting sands, of flighty, fickle, confused, damaged and weak characters that run, dodge, ignore or fail to grasp reality. Finally, at the end (E296-7) the reader is given the beginning; given Marnie’s life in its entirety, crushed to a dense and weighty block, and the history of the financial crash and its consequences. Finally, the reader is given for the first time a kind of direct and potent Lukácsian mixture of individual psychology *and* socio-economic history. The sheer density and facticity of the two pages devoted to her comes like a sudden welcome relief—a piece of solidity all of its own—at the close of the trilogy. Marnie is reliable, Marnie is dull, Marnie is real and the effect is such that the reader is intended to cheer for Marnie and her

sensible ilk like a lifejacket in a storm. The narrative takes Marnie, who is far from an obvious candidate for hero, and seeks to make her mundane solidity the truly exceptional and esteemed quality of the trilogy:

Looking back on it all now, she felt that so far her life had been demanding but satisfactory. Women only ten years older than her, encouraged to remain adolescent until they were thirty, had failed to make the transition from the liquid world: they seemed brittle when they had what they wanted, spoiled and bitter when they didn't. The younger ones, struggling to avoid the underclass enclaves of Eastbourne and Hastings, were simply worn down. At twenty-eight, by contrast, Marnie had charge of herself. [...] A single mother since her last year at uni, she found herself able to rent a small house well away from the chaotic suburbs; her employer financed childcare until Enny Mae was five, then a nice school. Marnie could afford medical insurance. She still saw Enny Mae's father, a man called William. Once or twice a year they had a talk. They were making sure that whatever future the little girl imagined for herself, a plan was put in place for achieving it. (E297)

This solidity has something admirable to it, no doubt—much as Lukács found himself admiring the solidity and compromise of the bourgeois as opposed to the dreams of the Romantics (Vazsonyi)—but to position it as the pinnacle of utopian possibility, as the trilogy does, is to undercut any attempt at a more radical imagination. What it occludes is precisely that, while compromise is perhaps the best an individual can do, radical social change requires, and can be achieved by, communal action.

Following this description of Marnie, the final scene is given over to Helen Alper. As a psychiatrist, it is fitting that the book closes with her, having the same dream of revelation—of

impurity and the malformed baby emerging through the wall—that the Assistant had, and which shattered her consolatory domestic fantasy. She experiences the same loss, the same waking up to reality, though she takes it well. The trilogy closes with her, alone in a bar. Near her there is an arrogant businessman, who appears to be a throwback to a previous age (or the future boys from Earth). He seems blissfully ignorant of the new socio-economic disposition, and in the final line we are told she plans to take him upstairs and “fuck him carefully to a tearful overnight understanding of the life they all led now” (E302). Thus the book closes (and achieves ideological closure) on the note of compromise that has sounded throughout.

### **Transgression—Ed, Utopia & The Daughter Code**

*Utopia is literally inconceivable, as well as terrifying in its implication of the annihilation of our selves as we know them.*

—Ruth Levitas, “The Archive of the Feet”

As with *Roadside Picnic*, though in a rather different way, the KT trilogy replicates the chasm between individual agency and social change that necessitates a leap into the fantastical in order to accommodate the latter. For all the trilogy’s demand that ‘reality be grasped’, the lack of a notion of communal agency makes that demand appear more like submission than agency. The KT trilogy, lacking a representation of communal agency, is reduced to representing reality as a bifurcation in which ‘society’ stands apart from and as background to the activities of the individual characters—something which simply ‘happens’ and which they cannot influence in any way, but which in turn tosses them about like boats on a rough sea. When the utopian impulse to large-scale social transformation manifests within such a narrative form, as with Red and his Golden Ball, it really is no surprise that the narrative finds itself forced into the fairy-tale or fantasy mode, because to move from a world peopled by atomised individual agents to a world revolutionised, without an intermediate notion of communal agency, is to *need* magic, or miracle—the fantastic, the *unreal*—to bridge the gap. Thus, the utopian impulse as manifest

positively in the KT trilogy, through Marnie, and any character who succeeds modestly through compromise, is a limited one, separated off and valorised against one more ‘fantastical’ that refuses the limitations imposed by reality, and breaks loose of it in the process, ultimately replicating the realistic/unrealistic division of the utopian impulse already seen in *Roadside Picnic*. The latter type, which is where transgression erupts into the KT trilogy, is embodied in the story of Ed.

From the perspective of the type of individual valorised by the trilogy, Ed is clearly abject. He was an entradista, diving into the heart of suns in search of extreme sports records. Then he becomes a Twink, addicted to the virtual experiences the tanks provide. ‘Ed’ from the short story ‘Suicide Coast’ is a clear referent for the KT trilogy Ed, and the latter suffers from the same basic problem as the former (and so many Harrison characters)—the risks he takes with his life are in the end a form of escapism, consolidated by his retreat into virtual reality. Despite (or because of) these flaws, *Light*, book one of the trilogy, closes with Ed driving a K-ship directly into the Tract, doing the allegedly impossible thanks to the help of the alien Shrandar, who tells him to “[b]e the future [...] Change it all. Change everything” (L289). This is a long way from the attitude of the rest of the trilogy, and that context frames such a utopian impulse as immature, and ultimately facile (no need to understand anything, just *surf it!* [318]). The ambiguity of Ed as utopian symbol is brought home in *Empty Space*. Ed turns up to reclaim the ship Nova Swing, currently occupied by Liv Hula, Irene and Fat Antoyne. He has come back from the Tract, and the utopian society he has found there:

Ed said he couldn’t think of a way to describe it. It was the big achievement. In there it was eleven dimensions of everything. ‘The entities who run it, they’re all charisma.’ They were over everything, having fun. ‘Fat Anthony, it’s just so fucking different in there.’ (E252)

This description parallels and parodies the classic problem with utopia, reiterated from Jameson to Levinas: it is inconceivable, and inhuman, appearing as meaningless at best and horrific at worst to the struggling individuals on board the Nova Swing. Ed does not look good; his bottom half reduced to dangling shreds of flesh (though he is, it would seem, in fine fettle). As Liv Hula puts it: “He’s not human any more. He has some plan, it takes no account of us or anyone” (E251).<sup>94</sup> The puncturing of Ed’s position as utopian messiah is near-total, as Liv and Antoyne refuse to come back with him; “Why would I do that to myself, Ed?” (E252) Antoyne asks.

It is, however, more complex than this simple dismissal allows. While no humans return with Ed, his mission in *Empty Space* is “to free the people” (E253). This is so vague and so encompassing it’s almost on a par with ‘HAPPINESS FOR EVERYONE’ as far as utopian impulses go. But when Ed returns to his utopia, he takes with him the vast number of quarantine ships that act as sealed prison and tomb for those infected by ‘escapes’ of daughter-code from the Site. These chimerical, quantum grotesques—clear markers of impurity—are taken as abomination by the human public, and represent genuine newness that moves beyond the postmodern play of surfaces that gene-cutting provides, and into the realm of the genuinely other:

The worst things we ever brought out of [the Site], we called them ‘daughters’. Bring out a daughter and you had nothing but trouble. A daughter would change shape on you. It wasn’t alive, it wasn’t technology either: no one knew what it did, no one knew what it was for. (N60)

The sheer impossibility of describing the utopia within the Tract, of understanding what has happened to Ed, what drives him now, and what those infected by the daughter-code actually

are, stand as another apparent confirmation of Jameson's dictum that utopia cannot be represented, and can only push us to meditate on the break as such. But in this impossibility—in this moment of transgression of the trilogy's ideological closure—there are, I argue, signs of *why* the trilogy fails to represent utopia 'realistically'. And the reason is that the trilogy is unable to think communal agency as existing within its defined frame of realism. Consider the human-code hybrids that *are* ready for the utopia—their single greatest defining feature is that they incorporate, assimilate, that they are not atomistic at all, but collect individuals together into larger organisms, and they cannot be assimilated by human society as it exists. They are fundamentally impure; they rupture the isolation and essentialism that lies at the root of the bourgeois individualism that informs the remainder of the trilogy.

## Conclusion

In its critique of the seductive and pernicious qualities of fantasy, the KT trilogy can be understood as utilising an aesthetic of impurity to represent the irruptive and disruptive power of 'reality' upon subjective 'escapism'. However, this agonistic attitude causes it to ultimately negate the opposing potential (and ultimately the necessity) of fantasy to grasp and narrate 'reality', and construct subjectivities, at all. Reality is presented as so *singular* that merely grasping it 'as it is' (the ultimate achievement in the spectrum of agency within the KT trilogy) is valorised as the most one can hope for. The actual socio-economic ground from which this subjective reality springs is utterly occluded. I have suggested that this perspective is necessitated by the KT trilogy's ultimate subservience to and reproduction of a normative and essentialising bourgeois ideology of compromise. Finally, the trilogy is caught within the conceptual horizon of a neoliberal individualism, that bars it from thinking radical social transformation realistically, and forces the representation of the genuine utopian impulse into the realm of the fantastic, to be quarantined through its identification as abject and impure, and which limits the trilogy's ability

to properly think through such a transformation. In the following chapter, I consider the works of China Miéville, in which an embrace of the figural potential of the *flaw*, and a correlative valorisation of *impurity*, finally allow radical social transformation via communal agency to be thought through.



## 5.

# IMPURE UTOPIA: DISRUPTING DESIRES AND CREATING NEW VALUES IN CHINA MIÉVILLE'S GROTESQUE FANTASTIC

*People will assume that they like originality because it is new and different. This is somewhat analogous to the man who says he admires and respects the skill of the bull-fighter, but abhors the killing of the bull. It is the death of the bull and only this which makes it fascinating. Pure originality in the arts is neither different nor new, it is merely chaos. The artist by introducing originality into a work and maintaining it there in balance with other parts of the work has managed for the moment to kill chaos. Originality is an awareness of the proximity of chaos, talent in its more serious and best sense is the courage and the capacity to deal with it. The majority of mankind is involved with repeating to himself over and over "I am safe." The man who is a true artist continually reinstates the existence of danger, at the same time managing in some way to cope with it. He is continually within the process of victory. He does not conceive of victory as accomplished, or worse still, hide from all possibility in a shell of safety. The man who deals with originality is desperately needed but seldom wanted. For along with his promise of victory he lets loose these shadows of chaos.*

—David Hare, "The Myth of Originality in Contemporary Art"

## Introduction

China Miéville has already received plenty of critical attention, much of which revolves around the political import of the Miévillian form and aesthetic. A consensus has emerged—evidenced particularly in a special issue of the journal *Extrapolation* in 2009 devoted to Miéville, and at a two-day conference in 2013 ('Weird Council: An International Conference on the Work of China Miéville')—which I will take as the bedrock for my analysis of Miéville's project. Building on this previous work, in this chapter I will demonstrate how Miéville's novels effect a transformative intervention, concerned with instituting and projecting a sense of reality as always incomplete, as in process and as containing the potential for change within it—as dialectical and utopian, in other words, and refusing purity discourses that would seek to establish essentialist

claims. This ontological opening up robs the status quo of any appearance of permanence or claims to being an expression of some essence—this is the conceptual role of the flaw as I have framed it. But unlike the Kefahuchi Tract trilogy, the potency of this ontological insecurity is not ultimately neutered by a grounding of the narrative in the psychological experience of the bourgeois individual. Rather, in Miéville's work, individuals are understood as producing and being produced by their relations with other individuals, which again refuses purity discourses, this time at the level of subject formation and interpersonal relationships. And unlike *Roadside Picnic*, Miéville's work allows the representation of the communal agency required to produce and be produced by social institutions, so radical social change can be registered without going over wholly into the realms of individual wish-fulfilment and fairy tale. In particular, characters in Miéville's work are often concerned with the questions of value and desire that have run throughout this thesis; they are concerned with what is valuable, and why, and most importantly, with the power to decide what is valuable, which means the power to implement encompassing political change. In this way, Miéville's work can be understood as truly *cognitive* as I have defined it. It allows a significant representation of social relations, as Suvin has it, but also, and more importantly, it is demonstrative of the representational strategies that are required in order to think fundamental social change realistically (i.e. remaining within a narrative framework that registers historical and material resistances to agency—Jameson's reality principle). Transgression of normative and purity discourses is built into Miéville's work from the ground up, so that here, the cognitive element is not quarantined as the 'bad guy' (*Iron Man 3*), or made impotent by a re-inscription of essence as an opposition to it (the notion of home in *Roadside Picnic*) or on a more fundamental level (the individual in the KT trilogy). Instead, impurity discourses are privileged, and Miéville's work as a whole can be understood as interpellating its reader into the position of a critical subjectivity that is itself resistant of the status quo, resistant of purity discourses and imposed normative narratives, and radically politicised as a result. A

subjectivity that is aware of its own agency and potential to alter the state of things, and to conceive of and enact a new narrative. I will range over evidence from a number of Miéville's novels, but focus in detail on *Railsea* (2012) at the close, since this novel is both a clear exemplar of my overall argument and has received the least critical attention.

## **The Critical Consensus**

The critical consensus on Miéville's work centres on a few common readings. The first is that Miéville's work is "unapologetically Marxist" (Sanders 293), shot through with a dialectical and materialist perspective, with themes like revolution and Empire playing a significant role. Secondly his work is understood as 'post-genre', praised as a "new, materialist use of the fantasy genre" (Vint, "Possible Fictions" 291), that allows the rapprochement of realistic, material and historical restrictions, which sf does so well (Jameson's 'reality principle'), with the puissance and possibility of agency commonly found in fantasy.<sup>95</sup> This in turn forces a rethink (to which this thesis has endeavored to contribute) of the taxonomic critical approach leading to the realisation that

in any fantastic text, and regardless of any taxonomic tools we might use to conceptualize it, there are no separate genre-ontologies that collide with, intrude into, or disrupt each other. There is just the materiality of the text, all the way down, all the way up. There is no gap. (Bould "Mind the Gap" 322)<sup>96</sup>

Miéville's fiction has also produced a number of 'utopian' readings, from Vint's analysis of *The Scar*—with its depiction of the "struggle over what heimat/home" should mean, and its project of "anticipating the future rather than consoling us to the present" ("Possible Fictions" 287)—to discussions of *Perdido Street Station* like Sandy Rankin's investigation of the utopian impulse of the

Weaver, and Joan Gordon's discussion of radical hybridity as utopian ("AGASH"; "Hybridity").<sup>97</sup> Miéville's work also often contains figurations of social change on a more or less grand scale, culminating most obviously in *Iron Council's* (2004) depiction of revolution. Given this thesis' focus over the preceding chapters on variously limited representations of social change (or even its possibility), the relative success of Miéville's work in this respect makes its representational mechanisms of primary interest. Carl Freedman has noted of *Iron Council* that, in the neoliberal present (particularly pre-2008 crash), it appears to be an historical necessity for a thorough and serious attempt to represent revolution to be articulated in the fantastic mode, given the prevailing lack of belief (or plausibility) in the possibility of radical social change ("To the Perdido"). But as the preceding chapters have considered, it is not merely a 'fantastic' mode that is required. Key questions for this chapter are what makes Miéville's work capable of thinking radical social change and in what way does it think it?

Finally, Miéville's work is claimed to hold the 'tradition' of Literature in contempt, for not showing it the reverence it typically demands—an attitude that bleeds over into a more general contempt for received authority. Genre boundaries are ignored, narratives are rerouted, fates short-circuited, stereotypes disrupted. As Vint notes:

Miéville delivers the familiar scenarios and characters readers have come to love, but at the same time does not take us to familiar conclusions. Instead, he forces us to see these familiar figures with new eyes and often to recognise the facile consolations that they offered in their more conventional modes. ("Introduction" 198)

Through encouraging an "active, critical reading" concerned with reclaiming a sense of agency over the narratives and fantasies through which an individual shapes their relationship with the world—as opposed to uncritically accepting dominant or established narratives—Miéville's

fiction projects the reader into “a new set of unsettling subjectivities” (Sanders 294)—interpellating the reader away from consolation and into discomfort and critique. The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with precisely how Miéville’s work is capable of acting as a vehicle for radical perspectives.

## Genrecide

In what follows, I will argue that it is reasonable to align Miéville’s work with Ernst Bloch’s realisation that “getting it right in terms of existing conditions was often too conservative, that hazarding what the good required often meant taking leave of epistemological guarantees” (Hudson 25). It is this insight that demands Suvin’s cognitive estrangement—heavily influenced by Bloch—be made applicable beyond the limits set for it by its originator. The “scientific pretensions” and “epistemological gravity” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 57) of sf are no longer to be considered an advantage over the flexibility of fantasy in articulating agency and rupture. The sf/fantasy debate in political criticism captures in microcosm a larger political debate: if there is difficulty in articulating an alternative, perhaps a new mode of articulation is required. In order to: “keep the culture open to new possibilities and to provide it with a sense of ‘where to’ in a normative rather than a futurological sense” (Hudson 28), the organon of cognitive estrangement turns its attention to the constrictions which nurtured it but which now constrain it—essentially taking as object its own conditions of emergence, and through that, the socio-cultural environment that informs those conditions. For the radical imagination in the neoliberal age this is a vital manoeuvre since, as Miéville notes: “The neo-liberal claim that There is No Alternative is all about trying to draw the line of the ‘never-possible’ at a place which strips humans of any meaningful transformative agency” (“Reveling” 365). There is a discursive authority that, in the West at least, seeps from techno-science through the economy and into politics and morality,

obscuring and limiting the sense of what is and is not possible, and sf is all too often caught up in articulating these limits, rather than questioning them.<sup>98</sup>

It is not, however, enough to simply write fantasy or horror instead, since this is to cede the crucial ground and perspective of sf (the future, technological advance, rationality, the interaction of the material with the social) to a capitalist imagination. Neither is it enough to insert the generic tropes of fantasy and the Weird into the sf perspective. There are examples of this—perhaps the most structurally obvious one is Justina Robson’s ‘Quantum Gravity’ series, in which separate universes populated by elves, or demons, faerie, or the dead, come into contact with each other and a universe of technologically-advanced humans.<sup>99</sup> The challenge that these alternative generic modes could pose to the sf mode is completely domesticated by the logic of the latter, leaving the reader with an enjoyable but politically and generically superficial sf assassin-spy story that happens to have some magic and ghosts in it.<sup>100</sup>

Miéville’s work is different. The specificity of that difference in generic terms lies partly in the lack of respect he shows for any sense of ‘received authority’ in terms of generic expectations, and partly in the ‘Weird’ understanding of reality that the works pay testament to. There is no ‘blending’ of received genres, each with their own distinct quality, but rather a semi-autonomous child of them all and more that is acutely aware of its historical context. To echo Bould, there is only the ‘materiality of the text’, all the way up, all the way down. In its wholeness, Miéville’s fiction puts the lie to the strictness and necessity of generic boundaries, revealing them as what they are—large-scale narrative restrictions, limits on what is to be considered possible within a particular narrative, imposed from the outside; in other words, ideological formations.

It is appropriate here to quickly distinguish China Miéville’s work from other forms of post-genre literature that have emerged in the same period, for the light it casts on the specificity of the former. For the sake of critical convenience, Miéville’s work is commonly termed New Weird, and this label functions appropriately here to distinguish it from the other main current of

post-genre writing, the slippery postmodern writings that have earned the title Slipstream (or occasionally Interstitial). There is no critical consensus on precisely what either New Weird or Slipstream ‘are’, but certain trends can be agreed on. Jeff Vandermeer notes

two significant ways in which the New Weird can be distinguished from Slipstream or Interstitial fiction. First, while Slipstream and Interstitial fiction often claim New Wave influence, they rarely if ever cite a Horror influence, with its particular emphasis on the intense use of grotesquery focused around transformation, decay, or mutilation of the human body. Second, postmodern techniques that undermine the surface reality of the text (or point out its artificiality) are not part of the New Weird aesthetic, but they are part of the Slipstream and Interstitial toolbox. (xvii)

Kelly and Kessel see Slipstream as “a literary effect rather than a fully developed genre” (“Slipstream” xii), and Frelik summarises that it is accomplished by “violating the tenets of realism through cognitive dissonance, generic and conventional indeterminacy, and playful postmodernity” (4). The key difference that I discern, in tandem with the opinions quoted, is one of energy. Both embrace uncertain ontologies, but Slipstream fictions are entropic, subjective, confused, aporetic, where Miéville’s work is a muscular assertion of an energetic world, a world of growth, social movements, multiplicity and vigour. Perhaps these two, superficially similar post-generic literatures might be conceived as antithetical to each other: Slipstream enacts the deliquescence of genre under the auspices of an exhausted and mannered postmodernism, and has a distinctly subjective feel to it, as if the world is nothing but affect writ large; the New Weird on the other hand suggests the active generation of new political possibilities, meanings and discourses from the soup of genre, and is far more ‘objective’ or even ‘realist’ in the Lukácian sense—the former is a grave, the latter a womb, but both are responses to the same socio-

historical moment of global neoliberalism and the concomitant ‘revaluation of all values’.<sup>101</sup> In the terms of this thesis, Slipstream might be considered as a sophisticated submission to the conceptual limitations of its contemporary moment, while the New Weird represents a maintaining of what Lear and Plenty Coups would consider radical hope, in the face of neoliberalism’s social and cultural devastation.

## **The Weird in and with History**

A major element in the composition of the New Weird is, of course, the Weird, and the particular ontology that undergirds it. Miéville redeems this alternative tradition of fantastic fiction—that of H.P. Lovecraft, Alfred Hope Hodgson, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood and others. These authors wrote the Weird and fantastical underbelly that has always haunted and interpenetrated an sf in denial of its repressed half, much like the Enlightenment (and Marxism) was “always already haunted by [...] Gothic ghosts” (Cohen, *Profane Illuminations* 2).<sup>102</sup> A consistent exposing and re-knitting of the ‘irrational’ underbelly of sf—which is and was *always* a part of the whole, though disavowed—allows Miéville’s fiction to perform precisely the cognitive estrangement for which this thesis calls: the cognitive estrangement of cognitive estrangement as such. To estrange not only the real world, but also the very lens that estranges, and cause a re-evaluation of the reader’s world *and perspective* through that new lens.

The political moment in which Miéville’s work emerged was ripe for the Weird perspective.<sup>103</sup> Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in ’89, after over two decades of Capitalism being the only rational game in town, alternatives to it are seen as irrational and unrealistic by the tyranny of neoliberal common sense. Capitalism ceased to be a choice and became ontology, disappearing into the background of a discourse that centered instead on the effects of capitalism: on globalisation, postmodernism, identity politics, localism, and cultural relativism. In sf this registered most clearly in cyberpunk, a movement that reveled whole-heartedly in the neoliberal



takeover of the 1980's, a reality that it less estranged than celebrated, and which prompted John Clute and Csicsery-Ronay's laments over sf's politically moribund state.<sup>104</sup> In the terms of purity and impurity I have been deploying, the Weird can be roughly understood as purity overwhelmed by impurity—a faith in the constructed orders and systems (the management of risk in the financial sector, for example) and the correctness of their descriptions of reality, brought low by the intrusion of some reality that escaped them (the small matter of a much larger risk variability than was allowed, for example).<sup>105</sup> The Weird is the representation of impurity as cosmic, all-encompassing and terrifying—not the stranger that comes to your town but the race of near-omnipotent, inscrutable and malicious Old Ones whose reawakening render humanity meaningless. It is a literature that *knows* how little humanity knows, is obsessed with the incursion of chaos into fragile order.<sup>106</sup> The Weird is premised on unsettling comfortable notions of what reality is like at the most basic ontological level, and thereby undercuts the status quo and its epistemology, the authority of which is ultimately built on its monopoly over how we understand the nature of reality—the ideal literature with which to question the triumphant discourse of neoliberalism. It is for this reason that the *flaw* is such a prominent symbol of the Weird in more traditionally science fictional narratives: it figures the unknown (and unknowable) penetrating and radiating out into mundane reality from a tear in the fabric, much as the Weird perspective penetrates and saturates the sf narrative. In both cases, the dominant epistemology and ontological claims are revealed as contingent ideological constructions. The precise nature of the critique of the status quo depends, as I demonstrated in the preceding chapters, on the representational details of the flaw, how it is framed and what are its consequences.

Critical approaches to sf that claim for it an 'epistemological gravity', and 'scientific pretensions', a proximity to 'realism', and that see the irruption of other genres into it as 'contamination' are, clearly, purity discourses. In claiming to make a statement about the 'nature' of science fiction, they are in fact making an ontological claim that implicitly privileges sf

over other genres of the fantastic, for the reason that it reinforces normative understandings of reality. In these terms fantasy and the Weird stand in an impurity-purity relationship with sf, constantly threatening to undermine its self-identity as a rational and realistic genre, but this is only true if we begin from an essentialised notion of sf in the first place. The Weird perspective, in contrast, founds a reality that is always-already Weird. Rather than impurity figuring a disruption of a prior order or essence, the Weird can theoretically encompass any number of competing epistemologies and status quos, since these can only exist superficially and temporarily against the deep history and basic unfathomability of a Weird reality, like bubbles on the surface of water.<sup>107</sup> In this way can the Weird be particularly amenable to providing a foundation for a narrative driven by an historical materialist perspective.

While the force of the original Weird was premised on the full intrusion of sublime horror, the noumenal, into the mundane, and was in truth a literature that *feared* the Weird world, and craved stability—was an hysterical literature—the New Weird (or post-genre fantastic, with strong elements of Weird), and Miéville's work in particular, brings that intrusion into everyday life and embraces it as the basic generative principle of the mundane. In Miéville's worlds—Bas-Lag most clearly, but the same is true of the construction of all his texts—reality is never figured as self-identical with itself and is at bottom *dynamic*. In other words, Miéville takes the radical ontological and epistemological instability occasioned by the generic techniques of the Weird, and deploys them to convey a reality dialectically structured as Freedman (*Art & Idea*) argues, always becoming, always creative and in contradictory tension with itself. This perspective places *purity* as the intrusion, as the violence (though often pragmatically necessary) done to a fundamentally 'impure' reality—such that 'impurity' begins to lose its negative moral associations, and becomes simply 'the way of things', and 'purity' begins to appear as the abomination—ontologically, epistemologically, axiologically, politically, materially and in terms of social relations.<sup>108</sup>

## The Flaw

At bottom, the Weird perspective is built upon the notion of the flaw. It can be a literal rupture in space, or it can be a revelation that shakes the foundations of the known, because the function of the flaw is not to rupture reality as such, but understandings of reality—the Weird is what humanity has failed to see, failed to grasp, but *is nonetheless there*. In this sense it is *inflationary* as Freedman suggests of sf (“Marxism, Cinema”). The classic Miévilian example, in terms of its political suggestiveness as well as its foundational role in the construction of the secondary world of Bas-Lag, is crisis energy. In *Perdido Street Station*, Isaac discovers ‘crisis energy’ lies at the heart of (what is thus revealed as) an essentially contradictory and dialectic reality, where everything is in danger of turning into its opposite, “the tendency of the real to become what it was not” as Bellis Coldwine puts it later, in *The Scar* (438). At first glance, this doesn’t appear to be a ‘flaw’ in the traditional Weird sense; no actual monsters are threatening to burst through it. But consider the argument of the thesis so far. From the perspective of a status quo—which deals in ideological purity discourses and founds its power on its naturalness, its inevitability given the truth of particular ontological claims which it makes—from that perspective things that threaten to transgress it are considered monstrous, impure. The (historical materialist) discovery of crisis energy, that any particular historical moment is unfinished and always contains the seeds of the future, of that which will arise and overthrow it, is, for the status quo, precisely metonymic with the discovery of a rift through which monsters will emerge. In the shape of dissent, protest, resistance, alternative value-systems and alternative social institutions, the dialectical core of reality will produce the emergent that threatens the dominant. This is the best example of how Miéville has taken the Weird perspective, seen how it functions *beneath the surface*, as I am describing, beneath all the gaudy monsters and the thrills of horror, and turned it to radical political ends.

In the second Bas-Lag novel, *The Scar*, the protagonists find themselves heading for a different flaw, a vast rent in the sea, which is the source of ‘possibility mining’, where all that might have been leaks forth into the world. In *Iron Council*, the Torque, or the Cacatopic Stain, features heavily, a flaw more obviously Lovecraftian in nature:

A badland beyond understanding. Where men might become rat-things made of glass and rats and devilish potentates or unnatural sounds and jaguars and trees might become moments that could not have happened, might become impossible angles. Where monsters go and are born. (293)

Maintaining the Weird stress on malice and wrongness, the Stain is where “the land, and the air, and time are sick” (293). There may be critical disagreement over the precise metaphorical values of each of these ‘flaws’,<sup>109</sup> but all of them are clear examples of a troubled ontology, a Weird reality, where each interpretation fixed upon it effects a particular but partial and transient representation of it: “*We ain’t seeing what this really is*, Cutter thought. *This is just one idea. One way of it being.*” (*Iron Council* 443). This conveys one of the key informing tropes of Miéville’s work: the fact that fantasy or imagination create, shape or tear down ‘realities’ that moments before may have appeared as solid as anything, because reality *is*, in one sense, humanity’s interpretation of it—particularly in a Weird reality—and it’s in the seizing of power to manipulate those epistemologies, those value systems, that social relations can be remade, and along with them, ‘reality’ itself.<sup>110</sup> But it is also a constant reminder of the insufficiency of epistemology, since reality is always capable of surprising: “the moment bowed and swelled and spat out strangeness” (*Iron Council* 131), indeed such slipperiness might be the very definition of ‘reality’.

## Grotesque Ontology

*The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis.*

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*

Carl Freedman and others have done the work of demonstrating how Miéville's novels emerge from and embody a radically dialectical and materialist perspective, and employ an aesthetic of hybridity.<sup>111</sup> In turn, I have claimed Miéville privileges discourses of impurity, beginning with a Weird ontology. This privileging manifests representationally and aesthetically within his work via the grotesque. The notion of the grotesque adds something to Miéville's work that the notion of the dialectic does not: it allows a making-visible of things otherwise occluded. It allows a dialectical 'unfinishedness' to be represented at the level of individual characters, which in turn allows them to be understood as in the process of becoming, and destabilises notions of essence at the level of race (or species—it is a fantasy after all), of normative social relations, and of individual identity. As a representative strategy, "normalizing, even beautifying [...] the grotesque" (Gordon, 'Hybridity': 459) and offering the grotesque as "the model of beauty" (Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *Seven Beauties* 215), estranges the reader from normative circuits of value and desire. Put simply: Miéville's fiction strives to make the grotesque and the impure *desirable* and *valued*—strives to interpellate the reader as a subject that does so—the success of which would have radical political implications.

Perhaps the most direct example is that of Lin in *Perdido Street Station*, and her relationship with the protagonist Isaac. While Isaac is human, Lin is a khepri—a species with a humanoid body, but a head like a large beetle. Their love is secret, and would be treated as a perversion if made known to the mainstream community. At the close of the first chapter, there is a love scene that communicates both genuine love and an erotic charge; "She pulled his hand towards [her

wings] gently, invited him to stroke the fragile things, totally vulnerable, an expression of trust and love unparalleled for the khepri” (18). Freedman (*Art & Idea*) focuses on this scene as a victory in representing congress between two completely different species—a genuine engagement of the Other for both—claiming it to be not just intellectually understood, but affectively felt. He goes on to cast the image as a powerful utopian figure, drawing on the image of an Adornian peace; the coming together of distinct entities *without domination*. However, while the love scene is precisely as effective as he claims, it is the grand finale, focusing on which occludes the crucial preparatory work that went into it. This omission, while no great issue in terms of Freedman’s critique, does point to a quality of utopian figures that is often occluded. The effect of the chapter up to the love scene is to impress upon the reader the *realness* or *familiarity* (with each other and to the reader) of the pair; the beauty of the love-making and its utopian quality can only emerge effectively from a previous foundation that utilises a discourse of mild impurity (known in anthropology as ‘joking relations’) which cements the characters not only as real (as properly ‘down to earth’—living, breathing, defecating beings) in a way that, for example, Tolkien’s Galadriel can never be, but to cement also the reader’s belief in their relationship’s existence.<sup>112</sup> And what is crucial about joking relations is that they mark and maintain egalitarian relationships not through a *lack* of domination, but through a consistent and low-intensity *exchange* of domination, or “the taking of goods, and the giving of bads” in Graeber’s phrase (*Possibilities* 19). The couple tease each other, rudely: “‘Termagant!’ he moaned after her. ‘Shrew! Harridan! [...] Lin made an obscene gesture at him without turning around’”; they self-deprecate, “Lin [...] knew when Isaac awoke. Probably because he closed his mouth, he thought, and sniggered” (Miéville, *Perdido* 11); they share the unglamorous intimacies of embodiment and—crucially—it is their comfort with the *specifically Other* intimacies of the other which truly marks their relationship as genuine, and overcoming of difference, as much if not more than the eroticism:

His arse itched. He scratched it under the blanket, rooting as shameless as a dog. Something burst under his nail, and he withdrew his hand to examine it. A tiny half-crushed grub waved helplessly on the end of his finger. It was a refflick, a harmless little khepri parasite. *The thing must have been rather bewildered by my juices*, Isaac thought, and flicked his finger clean.

‘Refflick, Lin,’ he said. ‘Bath time.’

Lin stamped in irritation. (12)

There follows a detailed description of them eating together, another deeply communal activity related to the bodily functions and the permeability between body and world that mark joking relations. Finally, Lin calls Isaac “*My monster*”, while he thinks “*I am a pervert [...] and so is she.*” (13). What is most fascinating about this scene is the cumulative effect of all these minor actions that make up the lived reality of life amongst a community, amongst friends and lovers. It lays the foundations for the universe the reader is about to be thrown into (not incidentally, their flat sits in the mad cacophony and dirt of a bazaar). The universe of Bas Lag is one where individuals struggle with their tendency to impute essences just as humanity does in reality, to seek the stability of ‘purity’ and identity and anchor themselves to it. But the futility and the negative consequences of the act are much more apparent in Bas-Lag, where the very ontology of the place is grotesque. The myriad of races, species and even individuals (of which more later) marks the basic fecundity of reality, and its refusal of essence:

He watched her swallow, saw her throat bob where the pale insectile underbelly segued smoothly into her human neck... not that she would have accepted that description.

*Humans have khepri bodies, legs, hands; and the heads of shaved gibbons, she had once told him.*

(13)

The utopian mixture of trust and desire figured in their sexual congress is only the headline of the real story, which concerns the messy reality that is constantly being negotiated by the fragile and always-incomplete relation between two separate entities. Utopia is beautiful and fundamentally *impure*, in need of being produced and reproduced just as much as anything that seeks to endure. The relationship between Lin and Isaac is a model example of this because it shows the production of a relationship between equals (and of the individuals themselves as produced by their relationship) as one in which purity discourses and essentialised notions of self and other are consistently transgressed and broken down, which refuses the hierarchising and privileging tendencies inherent to purity discourses.

### **The Grotesque and Strife**

In his 1908 thesis *Abstraction and Empathy*, Wilhelm Worringer claims that ‘realism’ or ‘naturalism’ in representation marks a “happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external world” (15). Though over a century old, and concerned with representational art, this argument resonates well with the literary one made in this thesis. If a ‘realist’ or ‘naturalist’ art is the product of an ontologically and epistemologically comfortable status quo, then clearly the grotesque is an aesthetic of antagonism (in which it has a long tradition as the aesthetic of folk resistance), akin to the Weird in many of its effects.<sup>113</sup> As Philip Thompson notes, the grotesque, in a clear echo of Weird, should be seen as



an appropriate expression of the problematical nature of existence. It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation. (11)<sup>114</sup>

The grotesque forces into the limelight the processes by which social relations, categories and norms are produced and maintained. If the Weird marks the impossibility of grasping reality, then the grotesque marks one powerful and long-standing human response to that truth, one that lays its workings bare, rather than occluding them. In the well-known preface to his drama *Cromwell*, for example, Victor Hugo associates the grotesque not with the fantastic but with the realistic, “making it clear that the grotesque is not just an artistic mode or category but *exists in nature and in the world* around us” (Thompson 17, emphasis mine). The perspective provided by the grotesque, while it may disturb us, is nonetheless a *realistic* one, though I would claim it is a realistic conception of the relation between epistemology and reality, rather than reality as such. In times of social strife or change, the discursive and active production of social norms that were, in calmer, more prosperous times the unseen water through which individuals swam is, with the grotesque, made an object of consideration. No longer are these human constructs taken as given and natural, but are considered *as* constructed, and questions asked about how, why, and to what end. Thus the grotesque can be understood as capturing the perspective of a subjectivity that questions an epistemology or social system discursively essentialised, as capitalism has become.

To go further—the grotesque also imbues the mundane world with an energy that is occluded by more static representations that match up to established categories of meaning. The grotesque provides a “fluctuating, mutagenic, class-defying world-picture of the sacred” (Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *Seven Beauties* 187), where the world is figured as brimming with potential. It is in this aspect that the grotesque can, appropriately for a discussion of Miéville, be understood as a kind of rough-and-ready pre-dialectic perspective, a forerunner. Further, it performs many

of the same functions as a dialectical perspective, or at the very least it should be seen in terms of ‘any enemy of my enemy is my friend’, in the sense that both aim to “rupture the self-enclosed unity of the bourgeois individual, the self-sufficient, self-interested, utility-maximising, competitive individual of market economics” (McNally, *Bodies* 128).

The exuberance and abundant invention of Miéville’s universes are in themselves demands that the world be seen as richer than we currently consider it, and in this sense are inflationary. Miéville’s language (with the partial exception of the leaner, detective fiction prose style of *The City & The City*) mimics the grotesque in its overabundance, its registration of the impossibility of precise or comprehensive description through its excessive attempts:

The Torquescape was insinuatory, and fervent, and full of presences, animalized rock that hunted as granite must of course hunt and spliced impossibilities. [...] the cockroach tree, the chimerae of goat and ghost, reptilian insects, treeish things, trees themselves become holes in time. (*Iron Council* 443-4)

Scraps of skin and fur and feathers swung as he moved; tiny limbs clutched; eyes rolled from obscure niches; antlers and protrusions of bone jutted precariously; feelers twitched and mouths glistened. Many-coloured skeins of skin collided. A cloven hoof thumped gently against the wood floor. Tides of flesh washed against each other in violent currents. Muscles tethered by alien tendons to alien bones worked together in uneasy truce, in slow, tense motion. Scales gleamed. Fins quivered. Wings fluttered brokenly. Insect claws folded and unfolded. (*Perdido Street Station* 52-3)

These are the extremes of grotesqueness, designed to confuse and disgust. But they emerge from a consistently grotesque reality, where it is the norm. There is an inoculation-effect, where a light

touch of the grotesque no longer acts as the ‘interval’ that gives the reader pause. As Csicsery-Ronay Jr. notes, Miéville’s fictions:

augment the power of the grotesque beyond the boundary informally guarded by sf’s principle of minimal rationalization [...] the grotesque extends beyond setting and plot to the scientific premises of its alternative ontology. (*Seven Beauties* 215)

Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s conclusion here echoes the premise on which this chapter was begun (and the argument thus far with regards to the aesthetic and political ramifications of impurity and the grotesque)—that Miéville’s grotesque aesthetic disrupts the fundamental premises of sf, and posits an alternative to the instrumental rationality and ontology sf traditionally reproduces.

### **Severing Figure from Ground: The Weird as Process & Goal**

To return now in greater depth to something I noted in Chapter 3: in a 2013 seminar on sf and cognitive estrangement (“An Approach”), Suvin makes the following claim, maintaining the position set out in the final chapter of his 1983 *Positions and Presuppositions*:

All sf texts are more or less clear parables, whose clarity is strongly responsible for the story’s coherence and significance, so that you can say that here, the vehicle becomes secondary, and we can use the false analogy of time travel as long as it doesn’t become the tenor, or the meaning; then we cannot use it.

For Suvin, conformity of the text’s vehicle (or figure) to the tenor (or ground) of the ‘real’ world (what Suvin calls the ‘author’s zero world’) is crucial. The rigor with which the parable is developed is directly responsible for the quality—aesthetic and political—of the sf text, and for its

cognitive properties. This becomes a problem when sf and the hegemonic narratives of the status quo of technologically advanced capitalist societies coalesce—when the parable is told in the language, and with the structuring ideas, of the dominant ideology it from which it supposedly estranges. As Clute notes:

Can sf, as a set of cognitions which differ from the world, exist in a world which takes on the colouring of our thought? *What now is figure, what now is ground?* What now is difference, what now is mission statement? (68, emphasis mine)

Against this Suvinian demand, Miéville claims that the fiction he writes, for which he prefers the terms Weirid, is “its own end”. The Weirid is characterised by “the refusal to choose between the literal and the metaphoric” and is “a surrender to the internal reality [of the narrative], but a critical one”. Any cognition produced within the Weirid “follows from its almost S&M style debased submission to the Weirid”, and he concludes, “I am the Weirid’s bitch [...] this isn’t a ‘game’. New Weirid disdains Safe Words” (in Cramer). This characteristically exuberant outburst (taken from the original blog discussions as to the properties of the New Weirid) sets Miéville in opposition to Suvin. There is no point-for-point parable, but rather the taking of the vehicle as its own meaning, the folding of vehicle into a new and different tenor, and the rigorous articulation of an alternative range of imaginative possibilities, no longer so carefully tethered to articulating the author’s reality. This, I would argue, is the vital move that allows Miéville the freedom to sublimate the variety of generic tendencies into a vision that once again allows the interrogation of the author’s ‘zero world’—it is the very *autonomy* of his creations that allow the reflection to be a dynamic and penetrating one.<sup>115</sup>

An example of this autonomy Miéville grants to the fantastic is the case of the golem in *Iron Council*. A magical technique known as golemetry is prevalent in Bas-Lag, which, like in the

Jewish tradition, animates matter. A golem can be imbued with a purpose, or simply manipulated by the golemist's will. The main protagonist of *Iron Council*, Judah Low, is a mighty golemist, the strongest in New Crobuzon. In the narrative this power can be read as a manifestation of Judah Low's political agency, his ability to intercede into the course of events, as well as figuring agency more generally—golemetry is described as “an argument, an intervention” (225).<sup>116</sup> His story begins working for the train company, and ends with him a revolutionary, and a leader, and his journey is matched by the growth of his personal power with golemetry. Ultimately, in his final decision to halt the Iron Council, to tangle it in a time-golem (the first ever made) figures exactly the imposition of his individual will upon that of the Council, for which betrayal he is shot by Ann-Hari, another revolutionary leader. This neat and effective metaphor, however, is a small part of the whole. Inserted into the fully realised socio-economic and historical richness of Bas-Lag, the figure of the golem multiplies its resonances. They stand for unwaged and unrecognised labour, with “[a]n economy of golems [...] making a few thaumaturges rich” (95); they make up the texture of daily life, “the afternoon crowds, children, bickering shoppers, the beggars, a handful of golems, shabby-gentile shopkeepers” (99). Judah first learns the skill studying a tribe of Stiltspear, a species indigenous to an area of swampland, displaced by the construction of the train route. The children “play with mud-made golems as children in New Crobuzon play marbles and shove-stiver” (169). It is practice-as-play, for similar skills used in hunting as grown adults. Judah learns to play golem wrestling here, and back in New Crobuzon, masquerading as a puppeteer, he finds himself introducing the game by accident to local university students. From this a small industry begins:

At first it is mostly students in the plasmic sciences come to the meets, then some of their professors. Then as word gets out autodidact somaturges and gutter hexers from the falling-down parts of town arrive. The sport is not particularly illegal but nor is it

sanctioned, and like most such activities it is always on the point of being banned. It becomes a business very fast, and there are militia informers to pay off, and porters and university officials to keep happy. Pennyhaugh takes care of this. They are unlikely heroes, the enthusiasts: intense, nervous and studious. They meet in venues of increasing size. They specialise, stud their creations in blades or slabs of tin armour, or give them bodkin legs and serrated dorsal ridges. These are golemachs, fighting constructions, matched against each other weight for weight. (217-8)

The figure of the golem, allowed to develop according to logic other than that of the strict parable or allegory, allowed to *exist within and through* the web of relations that comprise an analytical understanding of social reality, reveals much more about the functioning of the world in which it is set. It acts as an object through which historical context can be articulated, as can the interaction of institutions like the university, the law, the gambling underworld; it reveals the stratifications of society from well-off and well-educated to poor, from militia to professor to hedge-witch. It cuts across all these stratifications and enclaves of society and pulls them all together into a functioning picture that is ‘realist’ in the Lukáćian sense, despite (or rather because of) its fantastic core. The result is akin to the technique of adding dye to blood to follow the circulation through the body—the fantastic creation of the golem is the dye, and it doesn’t matter that it’s ‘not real’, because the social formations that it reveals *are* real, or at the least illuminating models of real ones.

Further, the institution of golem-wrestling is traced from inception to fully-fledged existence as social structure, with a life of its own beyond the intentions of the originators. This is itself a metaphor for the benefit of granting autonomy to the vehicle: it allows new possibilities to emerge that were not previously visible when the vehicle was to be read and articulated only according to the logic of the tenor—the golem as figure for individual agency, for example. A

new agency emerges, partly divorced from the determining conditions of its own emergence, and thus with the potential and the power to remake those conditions, through becoming-material, becoming-structure: in narrative terms, the vehicle becomes the tenor, productive of new vehicles. Through this commitment to the logic of the vehicle, to make no privileging distinction between vehicle and tenor, Miéville captures a truth perhaps missed by M John Harrison in his campaign against pernicious fantasy, and Suvin in his efforts to frame sf as a rational and realistic literature—that *there is no tenor but a previously naturalised vehicle*. To privilege the tenor in imaginative fiction is to produce a reality-effect in favour of that tenor, in favour of what is already-thought, rather than what could be, what might appear ‘unrealistic’ in the light of the hegemonic sense of ‘reality’. To privilege the vehicle, however, and particularly to combine it with the cognitive rigour of an historical materialist perspective, is to acknowledge the power of fantasy to shape reality, of the vehicle to become the tenor.<sup>117</sup>

The relationship between vehicle and tenor in Miéville’s fiction can best be understood through comparison to Marx’s famous ‘four moments’, where (briefly): (1) individuals need to produce the basics of survival; (2) this production will produce new needs; (3) humans need to produce other human beings to continue to exist and produce; and (4) to do all this requires social relations of some form or another. As Graeber has noted (*Towards* 58-60), humans tend only to be aware of the first of these four moments, and (he claims) it is precisely this that has led to the problems facing social theory, as to how ‘society’, the total (and very complex) pattern of action and interaction of every individual, and the material results of those actions and interactions, come to seem an alien force with power over the individuals that both produce and comprise it. Rather than a theory of false consciousness, Graeber understands it rather as one of *partial* consciousness. The upshot of this is that while humans produce what they come to see as social structures independent of them, they lose sight of the fact that these are their own constructions, and that they have the power to imagine and enact different structures and social

relations should they wish—what in this thesis I have been describing as deciding upon value, deciding upon that which channels individual desire through the actions of actors and communities. Obviously this is a fairly rough-and-ready summary of Graeber’s larger argument (see Graeber, *Towards* 49-90 for the key chapter), but it suffices to understand why Miéville’s work is so utopian in form and content: it figures institutions and social relations and subjectivities as *being produced*, and, crucially, adds to this what might be called an ‘agency-effect’, an impression in the reader of the potency and semi-autonomy of individual and communal agency, and its role in the destruction and transformation of an always-in-process structure. Further, it shows how through the process of the ‘four moments’, the individual is partly responsible for changing itself, as well as the sociality in which it exists. Consider the narrative of Tanner Sack in *The Scar*: Remade by the militia as a punishment for his crimes, Sack is sentenced to live the rest of his life with two tentacles dangling from his chest. In the city they are useless and painful, but once aboard the floating city of the Armada, he begins work as a diver, and the new context breathes life into his grafted limbs. Dedicating himself to the betterment of his new home, he voluntarily undergoes a further Remaking: gills; membranes stretched between fingers; secondary, clear eyelids—Tanner Sack becomes amphibian. The power of the narrative lies in the difference of connection Sack feels to each home. In New Crobuzon, the dialectic between agency and structure produces a criminal Tanner Sack, perpetuating the judicial and punitive institutions, and reproducing the power structures that brought Sack to crime in the first place. In Armada, Sack willingly undergoes an even more extreme transformation because it allows him contribute to the reproduction and improvement of a society that values him. Sack remakes himself, but only after he is remade by the social structures in which he finds himself, and to which he contributes.

The grotesque aesthetic allows this agency-effect to be conveyed. In fact, agency is best represented as something unfinished, something full of potential, always-almost becoming



something else. If the grotesque is a suitable representation for radical agency and possibility, then it should in my terms, not only be ‘impure’ but also mark the creative power to make, transform and destroy the systems and forms of value that cement and guide the patterns of action that make up social systems. And indeed, as I’ve noted, Miéville’s privileging of the grotesque, of, we might say, the monstrous, registers the thrust and demand of radical politics in a post-Seattle age—a politics which very much strives for the power to create and transform social forms and decide upon social values. This power that is sought is precisely political agency, and the upswell of popular protest movements—from Occupy to the Arab Spring, from the various environmental movements to the 2014 “Yes” campaign for Scottish independence—all seek to take the power to decide upon the values by which their society is organised into their own hands. From the perspective of the status quo, such movements are threatening and transgressive, and it is significant that one of the most popular theorisations of radical politics in the neoliberal era—Hardt and Negri’s notion of the “multitude”—draws on a conceptual language that mirrors Miéville’s representational strategies:<sup>118</sup>

The flesh of the multitude is pure potential, an unformed life force, and in this sense an element of social being, aimed constantly at the fullness of life. From this ontological perspective, the flesh of the multitude is an elemental power that continuously expands social being, producing in excess of every traditional political-economic measure of value. (*Multitude* 192)

Clearly the mode of the grotesque and the monstrous provides a means of thinking about radical politics that resonates with the age, which suggests that Miéville is capturing a zeitgeist in his own fictional fashion. If his literature interpellates the reader as I have suggested, then it is to recognise that

we are all monsters [...] And more important, the monsters begin to form new, alternative networks of affection and social organization [...] monstrous life, and its insatiable desire has become symptomatic not only of the dissolution of an old society but also the formation of a new. (193)<sup>119</sup>

The notion of Miéville's work as symptomatic of both dissolution and creation returns again, that desire drives the creation of new social forms in its demand for representation of the values that engender it. Thus does monstrous or grotesque agency institute itself at the expense of the prevailing status quo. I will now consider a few examples of this key process in Miéville's work.

### **Radical Defacement: Iconoclasm (1)—The Slow Statues**

Transformation of agency into its reified or fetishised form as structure and the creation of new value forms are partly represented by how *defacement*, which I described in relation to *Iron Man 3*, finds its radical potential in the form of *iconoclasm*. In *IM3*, defacement was utilised as a means of catharsis, where the value form and symbol of the status quo (Iron Man) was defaced, but only in order to reveal (or more accurately *impute* or *create the effect of*) the existence of the indomitable, natural and true essence of what it represented beneath (the individual genius of Tony Stark, the American way of life, and so on—the agency and creative effort that is concretised in the form of Iron Man). Iconoclasm, on the other hand, can be understood as an occasion where the same energies are released through defacement, but not to impute what was defaced as essence, but rather to destroy the suggestion of that essence, and symbolise a different, alternative agency, desire and value, antithetical to that status quo. It marks the transformative power of communal agency, and a material frontline in the struggle between different patterns of action and value systems.

Iconoclasm has—perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not—been relatively understudied by art historians and theorists, but there has been a wave of fresh interest in it since the turn of the millennium (again, perhaps unsurprising, and in tandem with the revival of political and social unrest across the globe). In a 2013 collection that marks this new interest, *Striking Images, Iconoclasm Past and Present*, Stacy Boldrick defines iconoclasm as the act of transforming an object “‘through a deliberate act of breakage’ into something with new symbolic meaning” (5), while Leslie Brubaker elaborates that

To destroy an image is an act of human power directed at an object of potential or actual power [...] the destructive act is in a very real sense a power play directed against the past and its baggage [...] a creative force directed against the past, in order to create a new future. (13)

The more the symbol defaced is taken to represent the social order being attacked, connected to how prestigious or public or recognisable the symbol, the more powerful the act of iconoclasm. Miéville’s fiction has plenty of examples as you might expect (even his invention of the khepri might be understood as iconoclasm directed against the privileged symbol of the ‘human’ body), but I will focus here on two that I think are especially interesting, both from that tale of revolution, *Iron Council*.

My first example comes close to the very end of the novel. Judah is dead, the Iron Council frozen in time, and Cutter returns to a New Crobuzon scarred by the failed uprising. He goes often to “the slow-sculpture garden in Ludmead” (609):

The gardens were ruined. The sculpted lawns and thickets were interrupted by huge sedimentary stones, each of them veined with layers and cracks, each carefully prepared:

shafts drilled precisely, caustic agents dripped in, for a slight and so-slow dissolution of rock in exact planes, so that over years of weathering, slabs would fall in layers, coming off with the rain, and at very last taking their long-planned shapes. Slow-sculptors never disclosed what they had prepared, and their art revealed itself only long after their deaths.

He had always hated the sedateness of these gardens, but now that they were ruined he found them a comfort. Some Collectivist or sympathiser punks had climbed the wall weeks ago, before Dog Fenn had fallen, and taken chisels to several of the larger stones. With cheerful imprecision and disrespect they had made crude and quick and vulgar figures, lively and ugly, ground filthy and dissident slogans into their skins. They had ruined the meticulous boring and acid-work of the artists, preempting the erosion-sculptures with pornographic clowns. Cutter sat and leaned against a new stone figure stroking an oversized cock, carved out of what might have been intended as a swan or a boat or a flower or anything at all. (609)

This moment captures the subtleties and complications that inhere when politics and aesthetics and culture intertwine. Aesthetically, it seems easy to decry this as vandalism. The values of time, skill, patience, subtlety, labour and so on, all suggest that something of great worth has clearly been destroyed for the sake of something of little or no worth. Yet before, Cutter was uncomfortable there, where now he feels at home. That word, 'home', is useful here as always. Whereas before Cutter felt that the gardens did not reflect him, oppressed him in its representation of an alien and oppressive value system that did not value him, now he feels reassured, that the gardens are the work of an agency that resonates with his, a desire that desires alongside his. Notice the typical divisions between status-quo, pure/radicals, impure: the eternity of the slow statues, the conceptual longevity and reality they grant the society from which they emerge, the mimicking of the emergence of an 'essence' already there from within the rock. On

the other side there is the profanity of the vandals, the irreverence, the quick and easy creativity that disregards tradition, and which suggests a different value-system, one that, like joking relations, pierces the self-importance and hierarchy of values of the regime. Here there is defacement, but an essence is not imputed, rather what is revealed is that the symbol *creates the effect* of essence, and that a different desire can be imputed through the creation of a different, appropriate symbol. This image figures well how political struggles manifest in the aesthetic realm, and argues the rich meaning of an act that is usually disdained as meaningless and mindless. Further, this scene at the very end of the novel is somewhat elegiac, figuring the mark left by a failed revolution. Like a rock star that dies young, the revolution will forever remain as a memory of rebellious energy, never having to face the contradictions to that origin that come with age, and occluding by their absence a question: would a successful revolution put down roots? Is it possible (or desirable, or, more pertinently, sincere) to maintain an aesthetics and politics of spontaneity and rebellion in power? Are these aesthetics irretrievably tied to resistance?

### **Radical Defacement: Iconoclasm (2)—The Iron Council**

My second example is likely the most crucial symbol of iconoclasm and rebellion in Miéville's oeuvre: the Iron Council. Specifically the train, but the people and their home are all of a piece, so the discussion includes them all. The train begins as a symbol of empire and capital, stretching its way across the continent on the backs of workers, free and Remade, tunnellers, track-layers and prostitutes alike. Weather Wrightby, owner of the railroad, visionary and entrepreneur, understands his task in terms of the unstoppable and holy work of history—it is history that he brings, and it crushes smaller societies and the homelands of indigenous races in its path, but with no malice, only a sense of the inevitability of progress. Trouble comes when wages fail to reach the front line and the prostitutes refuse to give credit, adopting the slogan 'no pay, no lay'. Tensions rise, the free workers strike over the prostitutes, and Remade are called in to scab. They

refuse, a Remade boy is killed by the company guards, and eventually the disparate groups of workers come together as one in solidarity.

There follows the mutiny, the revolution and the forming of the Iron Council, the seizing of the train and the escape from New Crobuzon law. The train and the social relations in which it is embedded are “remade”. This is a conscious appropriation of the term from the horrors of the punishment factories that produce the Remade and mark them as degenerate and inhuman, the term now put to use positively. The Remade and the free workers fall out of the old hierarchies and forge themselves anew—all take up, with respect to New Crobuzon and their old lives, the ‘untouchable’ status of the Remade which, in this case, possess something akin to the consciousness appropriate to the proletariat in Marx’s formulation, able to see the workings of the system that oppresses them more clearly than anyone else.

The key moment of the revolution comes in a scene that figures, like Lin and Isaac, an embrace of alterity, and an equality of self and other through physical intimacy. The only barrier between the free workers, the prostitutes and the Remade, the only thing preventing them from realising their communal potential, are the prejudices of the old disposition, the value system that created the Remade and marked them as scum, the social relations that create the illusion that the groups have antagonistic aims. All these are the necessary ideological and organisational corollaries of the capitalist state of New Crobuzon, which is reliant for its expansion and for its profit on the reproduction and maintenance of unequal power relations—that relies on the prison-industrial complex for its supply of free (and powerful) Remade labour, that relies on the social strata of women pushed into prostitution, and relies on created divisions between the workers in order to stymie collective action. Ann-Hari sees beyond these prejudices. In front of everyone:

Ann-Hari reaches out and grips Uzman and pulls him to her, he acquiescing with surprise. She kisses him on his mouth. He is Remade: it is a vivid transgression. There are shocks and exhalations, but Ann-Hari roars [...] these Remade are on *both* our damn sides [...] She kisses Uzman again [...] The prostitutes closest to Ann-Hari and most militant seek out Remade ostentatiously to touch. (267-8)

Through an act of ostentatious *re-evaluation*, Ann-Hari transgresses the old conceptual hierarchies, the old and oppressive divisions, and transforms the category of ‘Remade’ into something valuable through a demonstration of desire. This act opens the floodgates. Previous to the revolution, there was a Remade woman who, like the strongest of cactus-men, could push a spike home in one blow, but, while they are respected, in her “the ability is judged grotesque” (241). Notice ‘grotesque’—the powerful woman threatens to upset normative ideas of gender, and so she is considered impure. Following the revolution she is one of the most prized workers, her actual use-value, her abilities allowed to flower outside of oppressive and deeply irrational social relations imposed from outside. Again, it is a discourse of purity and impurity that is at work here. The Remade are grotesque because they deviate from an understanding of essence, marked so that their sin would be always visible (and a woman cannot be woman if she is so strong, she must be another thing). But in kissing Uzman, Ann-Hari shares basic fluids with him—a sharing of impurities (spit being one of the most basic examples of the abject)—as well as an exhibition of desire, as a mark of social group inclusion. A sharing of impure substances (akin to the logic of joking relations), redraws the social boundaries of the group in one move, based on a recognition of a new solidarity and a new sense of identity, a new class identity, based upon their socio-economic position, not that of their identity, that cuts across notions of race or gender or ‘Remade’. Ann-Hari does not ‘raise Uzman up’ nor does she ‘pull herself down’; rather she recognises an equality, and a shared commonality with the Remade, and through her agency and

the symbolic kiss, destroys old categories, and creates new, inclusive ones. The Remade are traditionally ostracised on a logic of purity and essence, but Ann-Hari's action levels everyone—they are all “monsters” forming “new, alternative networks of affection and social organization” (Hardt & Negri 193). This is the act that was missing from M. John Harrison's trilogy—a genuine, powerful and believable instance of agency transforming social relations.<sup>120</sup> Life after the revolution is different: Cutter can't get his head around how or why, since it *looks* very similar, but there is something here, after the revolution, that is different (375).<sup>121</sup>

This change in social relations, for a properly materialist representation, must be matched by a change in the objective world around them—the technology that is society made durable; the value-forms that represent their desires: the train. The most significant change is a very simple one: the train becomes a perpetual train, no longer linear but tracing an endless circle, track lifted from behind and placed in front, around an area grown into a small town—home, but one that retains a sense of movement, of possibility and becoming, like Bloch's *Heimat*. The question I asked above—is an aesthetic of iconoclasm and impurity possible to maintain in victory—arises again here. In the moving but circular train, the novel provides an image that goes some way to reconciling the issue, but is it a merely symbolic resolution? The Iron Council has had time to develop traditions, and here again, the novel provides clever solutions: the Iron Council balladeer delivers tales of their exploits in a seemingly inexpert manner but “the apparent halting of his delivery was a game: he told in a complex, arresting syncopation mimicking novicehood” (*IC* 24/454-5). This is a culture intent on maintaining the appearance of the fire of youth and freshness even within the inevitable subtlety that comes with establishment and articulation through tradition. As for the train itself:

The train had gone feral. [...] pushed and pulled by its engines. Two in the back, two at the front, their smokestacks all amended with metal flanges, painted and stained in



crushed-earth colours to mimic flames. And at the very front of the train the largest, behind its flaring guard-skirt, was so amended and reshaped with crude art that it looked to have distended over the years, almost buckled with gigantism. Its headlamps were eyes now, predictably, bristling with thick wire lashes, its cowcatcher a jawful of protruding teeth. The huge tusks of wilderness animals were strapped and bolted to them. The front nub of its chimney wore a huge welded nose, the smokestack ajut from it in nonsense anatomy. Sharpened girders gave it horns. And behind that enormous unwieldy face the engine was crowded with trophies and totems. The skulls and chitin headcases of a menagerie glared dead ferocity from its flanks: toothy and agape, flat, eyeless, horned, lamprey-mouthed with cilia-teeth, bone-ridged, shockingly human, intricate. Where they had them the trophies' skins were tanned, drabbed by preservation, bones and teeth mazed with cracks and discoloured by smoke. The befaced engine wore dead like a raucous hunter god. (18/366-367)

The inhuman industrial and imperial demand of its previous incarnation is replaced by a personalisation, a remaking with overtones of taboo, magic and totem. The council is the sacred heart of the new society—symbol and site of victory, and lynchpin of the new society. It is maintained in a feral, tribal aesthetic proper for its central role, but which belies the relatively sophisticated social structures and habits that have grown up in the time since the revolution. It presents values of wildness, dissent and even violence, standing as a reminder and connection to the origins of the society, while simultaneously uniting the individuals as all Iron Councillors in relation to the train itself. The balladeer suggests that they also privilege the appearance of a lack of sophistication, a lack of development. Again, these are clever symbolic resolutions to how a revolutionary society would approach maintaining its original values, allowing development and sophistication to contribute to their preservation and, through the desire-value circuit, their

reproduction. They are also thoroughly believable artistic productions of such a society, which in and of itself is quite a cognitive achievement on the part of the novel.<sup>122</sup>

This understanding of what the Iron Council stands for makes the close of the novel particularly interesting. Judah makes his time golem, and traps the train and those on board in perpetuity, just outside New Crobuzon. The final section of the novel is titled 'The Monument'. What is a monument? A symbol or memorial of something, not itself alive but a gathering of that living action, an anchor and a central node, in order to cement that memory into the future, affecting social patterns of action for generations to come. There are slippages here, transformations between purity and impurity, agency and structure. The Council goes from symbol of capitalist and colonial might to a totem of freedom and remaking, always becoming, always threatening, and finally, to a myth, amber-caught, a monument, an institution. It is a powerful narrative transformation. The Iron Council *was* its social relations, its patterns of action, the way it organised and unfolded through time. Once it has become-symbol, these lived social relations are lost, like a parliament building centuries after its founding. Removed from time, agency stripped from it, the Council now stands as a centre that radiates out influence and tradition and repetition, a power object that regulates and reproduces a particular pattern of action, a material object that embodies and makes manifest a set of social relations. The hope is that Judah has not *killed* the Iron Council, but *institutionalised* it, ensured it remains influential, part of the social and ideological landscape. But the fear is that the Iron Council consisted of its activity, its social relations in action, and now it is reduced to a museum piece, its context soon to be lost. The difference between these two positions can be grasped by considering how the Iron Council lived by moving in an infinite loop in the wilds, timeless in a sense, but timeless like Thekla, forever being reproduced, but always a little different. Whereas after Judah's intervention, it is once again timeless, but this time like a mall—it will not grow, it will not live, and its meaning and longevity are entirely in the hands of the society in which it is embedded.<sup>123</sup>

## Desire, The Future, Home

What is truly remarkable about the Iron Council, as with the Armada of *The Scar*, is that it represents a genuine and arguably successful attempt to envisage a progressive vision of social organisation that, while inevitably imperfect, retains a powerful utopian charge without falling back into pastoral or nostalgic cliché, surrendering change, motive force, and progress to the status quo. This surrender plagues the left, as is struggles under the formal impossibility of representing precisely what it is it wants, what its utopia looks like, without falling into the schematic on one hand or the simplistic on the other, and especially without projecting a negative future, one which is unable to contain the positive benefits of progress, technological and otherwise, thus far. As Mark Fisher asks:

Where is the left that can speak as confidently in the name of an alien future, that can openly celebrate, rather than mourn, the disintegration of existing socialities and territorialities?” (“Post-Capitalist Desire” 133)

Desire is an issue. It appears that capitalism has the monopoly over desire, and for the left to have any success, “the libidinal attractions of consumer capitalism [need] to be met with a counterlibido, not simply an anti-libidinal dampening” (Fisher, “Post-Capitalist Desire” 134). As this thesis has argued, desire can be conceived of as desire for recognised value, and that which is to be recognised as valuable within a society requires representing, making-visible. What any radical politics wants must be made recognisable as valuable, and it must be able to be represented, in order for it to influence public desires. But with commodity culture channelling human desires for community, love, recognition and so on, a remaking of symbols is called for, an iconoclasm that attacks the master-signifiers of capitalism itself. Miéville begins with the fundamentals—we are atomised, his work shows how we are a community; we are powerless, he

shows how structure is born of communal agency; we are rational actors, he shows the logic of affect and emotion. He shows the world as in-the-making, and he intensifies divergence and difference until the reader is forced to come to terms with a world that is fundamentally impure, and in this strives to tear desire away from desire for ‘perfection’, to desire for the ‘reality’ of things. In Vint’s words, he “refuses to concede ‘the terrain of fantasy’—that is, the irrational, wish fulfillment, affective side of human motivation and behavior—to conservative ideologies” (“Introduction” 6).<sup>124</sup>

Hand in hand with this effort is a re-evaluation of the notion of home. Following on from and improving upon the KT trilogy’s representation of home as a place that must be created and recreated, Miéville’s characters “struggle over what *heimat*/home should mean” (Vint, “Introduction” 5). In the Iron Council, in the Armada, in Saul’s Rat Republic (*King Rat*), in the Alien’s new inhabiting of language (*Embassytown*), in Sham’s open ocean (*Railsea*), there are any number of examples in Miéville of the struggle for and partial achievement of a home which, unlike Red’s in *Roadside Picnic*, or Stark’s in *Iron Man 3*, is genuinely progressive and forward-looking and which is produced going forward. None of these reject the trappings of modernity—on the contrary, they are founded upon the very latest advances (relative to their secondary-world or fantastic context): the train and the cross-continental line; the assembled floating city; the combinatory music of Drum & Bass; the new ‘technology’ of referential language; Sham’s cutting edge upside-down-train-carriage-‘boat’ (which I will discuss in more detail shortly). Miéville’s work, through this effort to imagine how creativity and desire can be parlayed into a better future, attempts to “win the energies of intoxication for the revolution” (“Surrealism” 55), as Benjamin said of the Surrealists (incidentally a favourite of Miéville’s—in *Perdido Street Station* political art movements are given an affectionate ribbing). I will now consider Miéville’s *Railsea* in greater depth, as a narrative that pulls together all these themes discussed.

## ***Railsea***

*Railsea* offers a profound meditation on hope and imagination, and on the struggle to escape a necrotic hegemony of thought that dictates the limits of what is possible. It is set in the eponymous railsea—a vivid, semi-mythical post-apocalyptic landscape. Human settlements are scattered on islands of rock separated by vast plains of soft earth, which in turn is densely veined with rail tracks (apparently infinitely so) and plagued by a monstrous menagerie of subterranean beasts. The story follows Sham ap Shoorap, a young boy burdened by an oblique dissatisfaction with the world and the paths on offer to him. He longs for something else, something other, but has no idea what this might be. In contrast to Sham’s uncertainty, the railsea, the apocalypse that begat it (the Godsquabble), and the way of life associated with it have entrenched themselves as ontological ground, their origin and history lost in folkloric ignorance:

since the rest of the world was brought into shape & existence to serve the aesthetic & symbolic needs of the railsea, we—cities, continents, towns, trains & you & me—have been functions of rails. (192)<sup>125</sup>

So fundamental do the tracks seem that wise men consider trees to be strange descendants of railway ties (220). The parallels between the fetishised inversion of the ontological primacy of the railsea and that of contemporary capitalism are not lost on the reader—the particulars of our reality might well be understood as ‘brought into shape and existence to serve the aesthetic and symbolic needs’ of capital. The railsea eventually turns out to be the result of competition between rail companies, in the long distant past, who drained an ocean to make way for more rails, and whose ceaseless industry poisoned the sky, now split into noxious upsky and breathable downsky. In the upsky Lovecraftian monsters swim the air currents, odd immigrants from elsewhere. By the time of the narrative present, these features—deadly soil, railsea, blighted

upsky, monsters—are simply how the world is, given mythological and timeless origin in the long, long ago. Further, the tracks of the railsea act as a physical limit and trammel to action, movement and thought. This is a powerful yet playful figure for the way a hegemonic system binds the imagination by claiming certain aspects of itself as universal truths, and brands certain modes of thought (alternatives to itself) as off-limits. It promotes the idea that there is nothing outside of it, and no means of escape: “*There’s not nor can there be any way out of the tangle.*” (76) But as always, the intricacy of Miéville’s fancy cannot be funneled down to a single allegory—it is rather the devotion to his creation’s own fantastic terms that makes his work so potently figurative in the first place.

Sham’s situation—longing for something other, but unable to envisage it, bounded as he is by the limited yet ubiquitous tangle of the railsea—is the very image of the issue of imagination facing those today who would challenge capitalism. Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek have both famously pointed to the apparent impossibility of imagining an alternative to capitalism. The question then becomes, what to do when bereft of the ability to imagine an alternative? How to sustain hope, and how to orient ourselves towards an unimaginable future, and avoid capitulating to the status quo? How, in other words, to escape the railsea?

The novel can be seen to dramatise this conundrum, and offers a number of alternative responses. Upon securing his first employment (as doctor’s assistant on a moletrain—like a whaling ship, but hunting large moles), Sham is confronted with the socially-esteemed career path of moletrain captain. A mockery of *Moby Dick*’s Ahab, Miéville’s Captain Naphi does not only hunt obsessively for a peculiar ‘custard-coloured’ moldywarpe (like a giant aggressive mole—see also E. Nesbit’s *Harding’s Luck*, and, to the modern reader, the curiously suggestive phrase “a vast mole” from *Moby Dick*, ch.87), but considers it her ‘philosophy’; both a symbol and generative source of wisdom and authority. Many moletrain captains have their own ‘philosophy’, which they expound to enraptured audiences in local pubs. Sham—and Miéville—

cannot be satisfied with such a production of meaning. Sham sees through the ‘philosophising’ for what it is, namely beguiling word-play; devoid of substance, and aesthetic at best. One character finally exclaims, “[t]hat doesn’t even bloody *mean* anything! [...] It’s complete bloody gibberish!” (268).<sup>126</sup>

More tempting to Sham than captains and their philosophies—and of more interest to the text as a whole—is salvage, and the glamorous world of the salvors who risk their lives on the railsea to gather the precious goods. The concept of salvage drives the book, in structure, narrative and philosophy; Miéville himself calls *Railsea* his ‘salvagepunk’ book. Even at the level of composition, the text is a consciously rejigged amalgam of salvaged literary works—*Moby Dick*, *Roadside Picnic* and *Robinson Crusoe* being only the most obvious of the list—and the resonance and meanings of the originals, reworked to serve new ends and overcome old limits gives *Railsea* a real depth, and demonstrates the basic principle of salvagepunk.

‘Salvagepunk’ specifically refers to a conceptual genre suggested by Evan Calder Williams, and elucidated most comprehensively in his work *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*. While often falling foul of the same temptations as moletrain captains, Williams’ work does propose some interesting ideas. Perhaps foremost among them is to not think of apocalypse as a single shattering event, but as a gradual and uneven process through which we are living. Given this, we should take an apocalyptic *in medias res* perspective on current reality, to see the world as ‘running down’, with such a perspective allowing us to re-cognise our situation, and creating the freedom to discover what can be salvaged, and what reworked to better ends. As such, the world of *Railsea* is perhaps better considered to be in the throes of a creeping apocalypse rather than simply post-apocalyptic. The novel certainly captures the sheer banality of a capitalist apocalypse. Driven by competition for profit to empty the ocean and scar the land with as many toll-gathering rails as possible, a landscape of mythical proportions is created from sheer stupid greed. Chiming with the Marxist analysis of a system that tends towards its own destruction

along with rapacious destruction of the environment, capital is presented here as gloriously stupid. Both sides of the ravine that separates railsea from ‘Heaven’—the ages of debt awaited by the descendants of the original winner of the Godsquabble, or the repetitive salvaging of the past for profit in the railsea itself—present a picture of a social system antithetical to life, genuine novelty and creativity.

This ‘apocalyptic perspective’ is a profoundly Marxist notion, in that it draws its power from the historicising of the now. Within the world of *Railsea*, the objects of salvage point to a time other than the mythological time of the railsea, and so can be used to historicise the contemporary situation, revealing its transience:

Between layers of pressure-hardened earth & shaley rock, an archeology of discards, centuries layered. Extruded edges of junk, shards, glass, bits & pieces, faint stretching fronds of ripped-up plastic bags. A greening layer: tiny cogs from a clockwork epoch; crushed plastic; the scintilla from an era of glass; rag-seams of degraded video tape; a gallimaufryan coagulum of mixed-up oddness. (175)

In his search for he-knows-not-what, Sham is drawn to salvage. However, he is not excited by “nu-salvage”, but rather “what he pined for, was the glamour of arche-salvage” (35). Sham tells himself that what he wants is to find some “current-running salvage [...] obeying forgotten plans” (26-7), salvage that has maintained its efficacy from the past into the future. A relic of before, a matter of passing curiosity for scholars of reconstruction, is not what Sham wants, but rather something that erupts into the now full of agency—a piece of live history—and stands as a demand and recognition that things were not always this way (rather like Red’s father in *Roadside Picnic*). In this sense salvage here acts like Bloch’s Novum: something that disrupts the world by pointing to a truly new horizon, but seems simultaneously familiar; a relic that has always been



among us, perhaps hidden until now. These ‘future-bearing elements’ of the novum fold invisibly back to something we knew but had forgotten, and the future must be constructed from the materials available in the present, which includes leftovers from the past. Orienting ourselves to a particular utopian horizon allows relevant fragments of Now to catch the light of that far-off impossibility.

In and of itself however, salvage is a false Novum. The stress on glamour in the text (the salvors and salvage are often described in such terms) is suggestive—Miéville is clearly aware of the more traditional meaning of the word—its connection to magic and the suggestion that its charm and attraction are deceptive or false. The salvors in the book are guilty of the crimes of postmodernity: of bricolage and glamour to no end other than itself. They create nothing but the propagation of a cannibal corpse, with no future other than more of the same rearranged, and no power to change anything: “when he thought of salvage, why did Sham start awed & end up deflated?” (99) This is where radical thought stands for the most part today—glamorous but devoid of content, of nutrition, of constructive alternatives, of direction for change and progress out of the railsea. This is almost a Bildungsroman of Miéville himself—or anyone who looks for alternatives, and sees the ones without a truly emancipatory horizon as enticing but ultimately empty. Sham, on the other hand, along with his friends who play a crucial part in the narrative, the Shroakes, know different. They know that salvage is not the end of it, but merely the beginning. Salvage is the finger not the moon.

Mistreated and stripped of all ontological alterity in this way, salvage is nothing. *Railsea*’s clear invocation of the Strugatsky’s *Roadside Picnic* adds depth here. In the famous passage from whence the latter book gains its name, one scientist tells Red of the mysterious objects found in the Zone that ‘we might be using a microscope as a hammer’ (a line referenced in *Railsea*). Without an openness to radically new possibilities, we can only see the most brutish uses of things, only their meanings as they are formed within a narrow capitalist horizon. Further, the

difference between a bungled use of something made elsewhere, elsewhen, is surely contrasted negatively to the wholly fit-for-purpose use of technology that is designed specifically for a new purpose, as is the boat at the close of the book (more on this below). Unearthing and utilising already-present, if almost forgotten, techniques and technologies is important, but only if their salvage and repurposing is towards a new horizon, where the techniques and objects (land-sailing, the salvage that made the boat) find a new, radical calling.

*Railsea* narrates Sham & co.'s escape from their artificially limited horizon. They find a single line out of the tangle, reminiscent of a Deleuzian line of flight. It is an escape that refuses to be recaptured, though of course lines of flight often run out of steam and are recaptured or reintegrated into the very assemblages from which they strove to escape. While most of Sham's companions on his journey are driven by the promise of personal gain, and eventually return to the fold enriched, Sham is an explorer without motive: an ontological explorer. There is a negative drive here, which is key—it is not that Sham strives for a polished utopian ideal, but rather that he knows what he has is not sufficient, is lacking and could be improved, that there is simply more, and other, and opportunity to create it, somewhere. As Sham notes:

Maybe you don't have to cast about to find out what it is you want instead. It's enough, maybe, to know you don't want what you thought you did. That's enough to be getting on with. (176)

*Railsea* originally presents itself as a quest for origins. But that is not what happens here. The discovery of the origin of the railsea provides nothing new. It is just the same old railsea, leading right back in to where it came from. Sham and his crew cross the abyss separating the railsea from 'Heaven', and find there nothing but a crumbling town, an end to the track, and the ragged remains of the heirs to the original company board, awaiting payment on an unimaginable debt

from ages of track usage. But just beyond that is something none of them have ever seen—the ocean.

*Railsea* dramatises and allegorises the positive power of expanding cognitive horizons, even or especially against received knowledge—the wisdom of elders, the authority of traditional belief.<sup>127</sup> Though it might appear that after the railsea, there is simply more of the same, more of the material reality rather than ascension to an ontologically different, mythological or theological realm, the fact the opposite is true. If there were a ‘Heaven’ at the other side of the chasm, then Sham would remain trapped within the ideological framework of the railsea—a discovery of a true limit, an actually existing borderline (and source or ‘essence’ not amenable to historicisation) that would stand as a departure from ‘reality’ on a human scale, and put an end to his adventuring. Rather, he discovers that the mysteries—in Marx’s phrase—“find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice” (“Theses”). Rather than failing to escape the reality of the railsea, Sham discovers that what was initially thought to be a place of irrationality and inhumanity (in the sense that it is antithetical to human rationality, one of godly or noumenal reason for example) is in fact graspable and interpretable, and beyond it lies yet another horizon, again, amenable to human thought and exploration. By refusing to believe that ‘beyond the railsea’ was something beyond rational human encompassment, Sham destroys a traditional view that placed firm limits on human endeavour and exploration, and reveals the existence of not one (the in-actuality mundane human reality of the Godsquabble and the consequential human origins of the railsea) but two (the open sea as opposed to the land, suggesting other lands, a new totality) new horizons, each larger than the last and each decentering the railsea, placing it into a larger context. Note also that in a sense the ‘essence’ of the railsea *is* discovered, and the rails were ‘a function of capital’, but that essence is immediately shown to be the (ludicrous) product of human action.

This conclusion allegorises the progression of knowledge, the incremental gains of cognition, the hermeneutical revolution of a further horizon.<sup>128</sup> These further horizons of Sham's are spatial, but as they are broached they perform an accompanying expansion of historical horizons: the timeless origins of the railsea are historicised to become the machinations of the previous culture, and that, in turn revealed as not the be-all-and-end-all of the world, must have risen from somewhere and thus something and sometime else. The close of *Railsea* allegorises the instantiation of History, and historical materialism. Less grandly but more pertinently, it also allegorises one of the main arguments of this thesis: that to broaden the analytical horizon of cognitive estrangement as utopian organon—to see sf as a mode amongst other modes, and not to privilege it as the only bearer of significant insight—is to see it better, within its proper whole, and in truer proportion. And as Miéville amply displays, it is to write better, to encompass a larger whole of human experience and truth, through the deployment of generic narratives and tropes in truer proportion and according to (what I have termed) their reality-effect, rather than the demands of generic tradition and coherence.

The novel can also be understood as making very literal the generic frames it is deploying. The ageing and threadbare discourse of sf—what is left after the collapse of the capitalist vision of the future—is literalised in a society that has barely survived an unknown catastrophe, and is now limited to a life lived on (rail-)tracks. Salvaging and selling badly-understood, ancient terrestrial or exotic alien technology is the most glamorous occupation, and provides a stream of commodified and content-less pseudo-novums; a merely spectacular simulation of the new. The surrounding sea of soft earth, riddled with giant moles or killer rabbits, both dangerous and childish, like a fairy-tale, stands in this reading for the wider ground of the fantastic from which sf struggled to distinguish itself for so long, but which it now finds itself increasingly threatened by, increasingly dissolving into, unable to maintain the coherence of the solid ground upon which it stood. It is telling that every item of 'salvage', every irruption of

the pseudo-new into the worn sf-world doesn't originate there, but is actually unearthed from the wider ground of the fantastic. Finally, the upper half of the sky—permanently obscured by dark roiling storm clouds filled with unspeakable flying monstrosities—is the Weird: the unknowable, the inescapable limit of and inevitable cracks in rationality, in sf, in our understanding of the world; the reminder that “there is no stable status quo but a horror underlying the everyday, the global and absolute catastrophe implying poisonous totality” that “infects healthy fiction”. (Miéville, “Weird Fiction” 513; “Afterweird” 1115). Taken together, these three levels form a reductive picture of the contemporary breaking down of genre, and the challenge to normative capitalist projections of progress, futurity and rationality. Admittedly, this is a reading that does not treat its subject matter gently, but it appeals for its clear depiction of the arguments I have been making. Further, following Sanders on *Un Lun Dun*, if we understand *Railsea* as striving for a particular subjectivising effect upon the reader—young or otherwise—then this is the main message: that narratives, fates, destinies, stories, fairy tales and so on all have a particular logic to them, which both facilitates and occludes. Each is a railsea of its very own. Cory Doctorow argues that a narrative can make a sequence of events seem inevitable—even necessary—when in fact the structure of the narrative is concealing certain naturalised assumptions that could yield a different result if questioned, and gives these structuring assumptions the term ‘lifeboat rules’. *Railsea* concerns itself with setting up lifeboat scenario after lifeboat scenario (the railsea being the most encompassing; Sham’s ‘Robison Crusoe’ experience another; the ‘quest for origins’ another; the domestic situation of the Shroake children—no fantasy robot to help them, only them and their presumably Alzheimer’s-afflicted uncle—another minor one) and exposing their self-imposed limitations, and breaking free of them by simply deciding to ‘tell another story’. Here is the edge upon which imagination and reality, agency and structure rub against one another, and it is on this edge that agency can flourish, and it is here that *Railsea* consistently directs its didactic intent.

Thus, rather than a teleology in a traditional sense, the real seeking in this novel is for true alterity, outside the system, outside narrative closure. Sham's exploration is driven initially by a 'not here', a 'not this', rather than a decisive 'yes, that'. The 'yes, that' is something unimaginable until it is arrived at, and once it's achieved, a further horizon opens up (like Oscar Wilde's land of Utopia). It is the unimaginable itself that is located as the impossible end to Sham's journey: the striking moment when the apparently boundless railsea gives way to an ocean; one seemingly endless but actually bounded and guided, the other truly new in every way. The latter presents Sham with a symbol for his own radical hope—the vast unknown beyond the rupture in which known ways of life, values, modes of cognition and ontologies become outmoded. But crucially for those of us who look for change in the real world, the rupture from known to radical unknown is crossed in steps—not an inexplicable leap—and the crossing is a matter of seeking the 'not this': an openness to negotiating between what you know and what you learn, and reworking what you have as best you can to suit what is coming. *Railsea* provides neither manifesto nor programme of action: it is, after all, only a novel. But in its fantasy it provides a utopian figure, and a means of grasping an attitude of radical hope that must lack, in this day and age, much mimetic content. It is the enduring mechanism of imaginative hope itself that is here articulated, rather than any particular and fallible object of hope, and it helps divine the path to take when treading unfamiliar ground. Such an open-ended conclusion has its faults of course—it is easily dismissible as myth, or fairy tale, akin to the ending of *Roadside Picnic*. The key difference between the two is that while *Roadside Picnic* slipped into fairy tale from structural necessity, given its lack of a grasp on communal agency and its essentially backwards-looking utopian impulse, the ending of *Railsea* throws the reader back upon all that which made the ending possible in the first place—namely the radical and utopian spirit of Sham and the Shroakes. I have discussed more concrete and perhaps 'pragmatic' envisioning of the utopian impulse in Miéville's other works. *Railsea* is aimed at a younger audience, and I would claim that

it is attempting to interpellate the reader into a critical subjective position from which the open-endedness of *Railsea* can and will be filled by apperceptions generated through occupying such a radical, critical attitude.

## **Conclusion: Home & Hope**

To end this reading, I would like to consider Sham ap Shoorap as a cypher and knot of two key concepts in this thesis—home and radical hope. Sham doesn't, in the manner of any number of children's stories, have a home as such. He is an orphan, and looked after by two uncles (perhaps homosexual? While it is never made clear their relationship certainly isn't treated as peculiar either. As with the Shroakes senior—a wife and two husbands—non-traditional family structures are presented with little to no fuss). But unlike those stories, the aim is not to bring Sham back into the fold—he starts off dissatisfied, and he remains so. Home is not a place you return to, it is *Heimat*, that constellation of social relations that can only be produced, that is always *coming*, in the future. In his progressive search for home, Sham comes to embody the principle of radical hope within the text. Sham is the chickadee, always learning from those around him, but he is also precisely “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things” (Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology* 57). Sham is *an attitude*, a spirit, a perspective, a refusal to submit to the available narratives. Sham embodies the process of cognition as I have described it, and can be understood as a character that has internalised the perspective of cognitive estrangement. He defaces—stretching the term to its limit—the railsea, exposing ‘essence’ as a product of a social and historical process. He does all this because he is unsatisfied, his desire is unfulfilled, he does not recognise what is on offer as having value. Finally, he demonstrates a confidence and an agency born of an appreciation of how imposed narratives can be rewritten. These connections, these overlaps and similarities between home, radical hope, cognition, utopianism, purity and

impurity, desire, value, agency, structure, narrative, imagination and reality—the concerns of this thesis—are here pulled together into a particular utopian subject.



## CONCLUSION

*What is one to do? The earth will probably sink and drown; but at least it will be the result of generally acknowledged political and economic ideas, at least it will be accomplished with the help of the science, industry and public opinion, with the application of all human ingenuity! No cosmic catastrophe, nothing but state, official, economic, and other causes. Nothing can be done to prevent it.*

—Karl Čapek, *War of the Newts*

*Best to let the broken glass be broken glass, let it splinter into smaller pieces and dust and scatter. Let the cracks between things widen until they are no longer cracks but the new places for things. That was where they were now. The world wasn't ending: it had ended and now they were in a new place. They could not recognize it because they had never seen it before.*

—Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*

The cracks are beginning to show. The tragicomic take of Čapek—a description of capitalist realism written long before the term gained currency in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—is gradually giving way to obvious disjunctions and ruptures, which appear as transgressions in the social body of the status quo; impure and threatening signals of decay that mark the fermenting of alternative visions of social organisation, flaws that reveal purity discourses as power games, ontological claims as profoundly ideological. After the Arab Spring, after Occupy, after the student protests across the globe, the close-run Scottish independence vote and the rise of the Spanish Podemos movement, the cracks are surely showing. These are seeds of the future in the present—*cognitions*—real-life cognitive impurities, revealing both the contingency of the status quo and the communal agency that can create, transform and destroy social relations, organisation, and value systems. Those who participate in these movements, those architects of impurity, are struggling to translate their values and ideals into structure, into reality. They face grim opposition, the drag of tradition, the disdain of ‘realists’, the paucity of imagination bred by decades of neoliberal dominance. Their power lies in a recognition that the future is not yet written, and that the dominant narratives that describe a terminally globalising neoliberal future can be challenged,

and rewritten, in the present. Communal agency, solidarity, and imagination are their weapons against the atomising, disenfranchising and stupefying effects of the hegemonic neoliberal discourse. It is in the effort to reclaim the terrain of reality, and of the possible, that the representational and narrative techniques analysed over the course of this thesis join with such real-life political movements. Although it takes strength from the fantastic, as this thesis has sought to argue, radical political change is not a fantasy, and should not be considered as such: the translation of agency into structure is not wholly beyond the means of representation; narratives that limit the societal imagination can be disrupted, and rewritten to facilitate it.

It is no real wonder that Graeber's socio-political theories, Miéville and Bould's literary-political theory and Miéville's fictional work appear to work so well in conjunction with each other. They are, after all, products of a very similar time, place and culture, each of them resonating with the post-Seattle political landscape. It seems rather obvious that they would share approaches, images, concepts and tropes. There is a zeitgeist at work, one feels, when Marx's line about the architects and the bees crops up separately and centrally in all three (Bould, "Dreadful Credibility" 77; Graeber, *Towards* 58; Miéville, "Editorial" 44). Their shared interest, which crosses the boundaries between disciplines, between theory and fiction, is fundamentally, as I hope has become clear, grounded in the effort to revalorise the potential of agency against a now-suffocating realism—whether a political realism, or a literary one—which reproduces divisions between fantasy and reality, possible and impossible, that are not only anathema to radical change, but also serve to occlude any potential that the present may contain. The latter perspective is profoundly undialectical, in that it refuses to see the present as containing the seeds of the future, the seeds of its own overcoming. The vitality of China Miéville's work, and the promise it holds for future efforts to create a politicised fantasy that is *good to think with*, lies specifically in the capture and articulation of agency into structure. The effort to represent Jameson's "break" requires techniques and tropes taken from various genres, in order to capture

the *becoming* element—the producing and being-produced—of the world, of social structures, of communities and of individuals. The effect of reality thus created is one that has the potential to recruit the reader, in the Althusserian sense, into occupying a position of radical, critical subjectivity—one which not only understands the malleable, constructed nature of social reality, but understands their own part in its reproduction, and the potential they wield, along with others, to alter it.

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Csicsery-Ronay (*Seven Beauties*: 59) and Clute (68) for example.

<sup>2</sup> Including three Arthur C. Clarke Awards, one Hugo Award, two Locus Awards, and one BSFA award, all between 2001 and 2010; an academic conference devoted to his work in 2012 ('Weird Council: An International Conference on the work of China Miéville'); and at least two monographs entirely on his work forthcoming, one of which is from the leading Marxist critic Carl Freedman.

<sup>3</sup> See, for a thorough and critical description of so-called neoanarchist movements, Taylor and Gautney. For an inside view from a number of the recognisable figures within the movements and academia, see Campagna & Campiglio.

<sup>4</sup> This sentiment was nearly ubiquitous, but perhaps best captured by the oft-trotted-out quote attributed to Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson and a few others, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

<sup>5</sup> See particularly Jameson ("Radical Fantasy"; *Archaeologies*) and Freedman (*Critical Theory*; "A Note").

<sup>6</sup> 'Ideology' for Suvin is that which denies its own historical contingency, presenting itself rather as eternal, natural, or essential. Notions of 'human nature' are perhaps the most obvious example. By claiming an ahistorical validity, ideological understandings of reality pretend to a universal value-free Truth, which conceals their roots in actual socio-historical relationships of production, and typically privilege certain groups or perspectives over others, Nazism and anti-Semitism being the canonical example here. Mark Bould notes in his "Introduction: Rough Guide to a Lonely Planet" that one of the problems with Suvin is that he replicates "Althusser's distinction between science and ideology" (18). I argue, rather, that the distinction Suvin draws is between cognition and ideology, where cognition is not merely "science" but rather a process of subjecting ideology to the corrosive force of historical perspective—an argument that will become clearer as this chapter progresses.

<sup>7</sup> See, for a thorough exposition of Suvin's position on sf and realism, Brooke-Rose, 72-85.

<sup>8</sup> There is an irony here, in that Suvin's theoretical approach to sf, the source of his position on utopia, and his key notion of cognitive estrangement, derive ultimately from Bloch and Brecht, and he has in the past written against Lukács ("Lukács"). The flow of history has altered the arrangement of the pieces, so that he now finds himself in a position structurally homologous to Lukács.

<sup>9</sup> "I make use of physics. He invents. I go to the moon in a cannon-ball, discharged from a cannon. There is no invention. He goes to Mars [sic] in an airship, which he constructs of a metal which does away with the law of gravitation. Ça c'est très joli," cried Monsieur Verne in an animated way, 'but show me this metal. Let him produce it'" (qt. in Evans 272).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. "SF is the literature that takes thought-experiment as its given reality, which it then artistically and ludically exaggerates and estranges. In other words, it is not social reality that is estranged in sf, but the imaginary, pseudorational models that a technoscientific society produces about itself" (Csicsery-Ronay, *Seven Beauties* 124).

<sup>11</sup> While I disagree with Freedman's treatment of cognition, there are of course resonances between his excellent argument for the affinity of sf and critical theory in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* and my position here. These resonances mainly stem from a shared Marxist tradition and a firm belief that the proof of theory is in the praxis.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the ubiquitously quoted original: "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (*Metamorphoses* 8-9).

<sup>13</sup> Suvin as neoliberal proselytiser is overstating the case, but the historical simultaneity and homology of ideological tendencies in neoliberal theory and the Suvinian paradigm vis-à-vis rationality and a certain demand to 'realism' is interesting.

<sup>14</sup> "[By] the end of last century it had become difficult to squeeze even a momentary belief out of magic any longer. It occurred to me that instead of the usual interview with the devil or a magician, an ingenious use of scientific patter might with advantage be substituted. That was no great discovery. I simply brought the fetish stuff up to date, and made it as near actual theory as possible." (qt. in "Wells' Law") See also from Wells' contemporary, Arthur Machen: "If I were writing in the Middle Ages I should need no scientific basis for the reason that in those days the supernatural per se was entirely credible. In these days the supernatural per se is entirely incredible; to believe, we must link our wonders to some scientific or pseudo-scientific fact, or basis, or method. Thus we do not believe in 'ghosts', but in telepathy, not in 'witchcraft', but in hypnotism. If Mr Stevenson had written his great masterpiece about 1590-1650, Dr Jekyll would have made a compact with the devil; in 1886 Dr Jekyll sends to the Bond Street chemists for some rare drugs." (qt. in Gawsworth 121).

<sup>15</sup> And, perhaps, *whatever the genre*, though this argument lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Utopianism as disruption has an honourable anti-tradition amongst radicals, as opposed to a more rational or 'scientific' utopianism of predicted and planned social improvement. We find it in Bakunin's '*utopianism as a disruption of the present that is also in the present*' (Newman 70), and it has a lot in common with Karl Mannheim's famous

pronouncement of utopia as: “those orientations transcending reality [...] which, when they pass over into conduct, tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time.” (Mannheim 173).

<sup>17</sup> It must be noted that there are possible positives for purity. Without an appeal to the collectivist categories of purity, difficult to find a point from which to mount a defense against encroaching market operations. Most relatively strong resistance projects recently have been based upon a sense of identity—of people, of land, of heritage, or even the media-savvy ‘we are the 99%’. Purity discourse is not *bad*, only dangerous in that while they seem to observe an objective qualitative difference, they in fact construct that difference, typically between an ideal and a reality that is failing to match it.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. “Its claim to articulate uniquely the new and the future leaves it open to endless doubts and questions that require its ideological dimensions to be affirmed anew over and over again” (Szeman 178).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gilbert “[...] it is hard to identify much clear enthusiasm amongst populations for the political philosophy of neoliberalism or even for its general norms [...] the inability to imagine an alternative to neoliberalism has contributed to a situation in which the very failure of neoliberal economics has been redefined as an excuse for more and intensified neoliberalism in the form of the European Union’s austerity agenda.” (18-19)

<sup>20</sup> Connecting superheroes to capital has been done many times and in many ways – see for a very recent and on-point example, Dan Hassler Forest’s *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*. The theme also crops up in newspaper articles from time to time, e.g. Shoard; Sneddon.

<sup>21</sup> See, for the rise of sf in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as a literature specifically concerned with modernity and the industrial age, *Future Perfect* by Bruce Franklin.

<sup>22</sup> “As a model for his new character, ‘Iron Man’, Lee referenced Howard Hughes [who] embodied the image of the independent, self-mastering industrialist of turn-of-the-century capitalism, compared with the likes of Henry Ford” (Genter 966).

<sup>23</sup> Spurred on by the “irrepressible conflict between claims of American nationalism and the neoliberal imperatives of the global economy” that “exists at the core of contemporary American society” (Steger & Roy 36).

<sup>24</sup> The Mandarin is seen as Iron Man’s main traditional enemy in the comic books. Shane Black’s decision to rewrite the character as a joke caused many complaints from fans, but it was a wise and witty decision in light of the ineradicably racist nature of the traditional presentation of the Mandarin. Also, it communicates very well the idea of terrorism as simply a profitable excuse for military research, spending and adventuring in oil-rich climes.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Lemke “[...] ‘human capital’ is made up of two components: an inborn physical-genetic predisposition and the entirety of skills that have been acquired as the result of ‘investments’ in the corresponding stimuli: nutrition, education, training and also love, affection, etc. In this model, the wage labourers are no longer the employees dependent on a company, but are autonomous entrepreneurs with full responsibility for their own investment decisions and endeavouring to produce surplus value; they are the entrepreneurs of themselves” (199).

<sup>26</sup> In the more nuanced world of the comics, by contrast, as Genter notes “Iron Man centers on Stark’s inability to reconcile with this wound to his masculinity, symbolised by his castrated condition [...] Practically every issue features an uncertain moment when Iron Man must flee from a desperate struggle with a supervillain to recharge his chest plate in order to stay alive.” (Genter 968)

<sup>27</sup> Zizek, *Living in the End Times*.

<sup>28</sup> The Extremis enhanciles seem more than alive, perhaps akin to the Lacanian lamella – the horrifying force of life itself – certainly the connotations of impurity suggest there is something here of the Dionysian.

<sup>29</sup> Like that conjured in one of the founding texts of the modern US, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*: see ch. 119, ‘The Candles’, for my favorite example. See also Walcutt, “The Fire Symbolism in *Moby-Dick*”.

<sup>30</sup> See for magic, modernity, reason and religion, the excellent overview by Randall Styers and Stanley Tambiah. For witch-hunts and social tumult, see Keith Thomas’ classic text.

<sup>31</sup> For magic as a means of marking social inequality, see, for example, David Graeber (*Possibilities* 125-6). Finally, for magic as a means of understanding the operations of capital, see Taussig *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism*; Cormaroff & Cormaroff; and McNally *Monsters of the Market*.

<sup>32</sup> In the original comic story arc ‘Extremis’ (Ellis), Aldrich Killian is one of a pair of scientists who invented the serum and wanted to see it tested. In the movie, he appears to be a hybrid of this original Killian, and a bit-character from the ‘Believe’ comic story arc (Gillen)– a cheesy Advanced Idea Mechanics (A.I.M.) salesman called Colin Forty-Four.

<sup>33</sup> Here, contrasting the film with the original comic arc is again enlightening. In the latter, as noted above, Killian is one half of the scientific team that creates Extremis, and so has claim to at least having produced something of worth. In the film however, he is the head of a company who merely uses the inventor of Extremis, creates nothing himself, and is happy to dispatch the inventor when it appears she is no longer necessary.

<sup>34</sup> Here I mean ‘propriety’ in its full etymological significance, particularly the French root of *propre* with its semantic range from cleanliness to order to ownership.

<sup>35</sup> Such a position can also be a very powerful one however, and it is possible, as we have seen in the rise of financiers to their world-dominating position, and their pre-2008 nickname of the ‘Masters of the Universe’, that they can come to occupy the very heart of a social order. In Douglas’ account of impurity, some elements undergo a kind of

conceptual inversion, maintaining their power and danger but becoming 'sacred', and so the guiding heart of the system. This correlates with other anthropological approaches such as Durkheim's concept of a sacred that could be both pure, maintaining order, or impure, transgressing it. Intriguingly, the transgressive sacred was known as the 'left' sacred, as opposed to the right (Riley 2005: 275). There is much of interest to be explored in this direction, but this is not, unfortunately, the place to do it. What is important to note here is that even when become 'sacred', the impure elements still need containing, and still, as with financial capital, produce instability and breakdown of order.

<sup>36</sup> See Murse and Rapoza. While the answer from the economists to the question of whether China's ownership of the debt is a threat appears to be a resounding no, it is interesting that the question is being asked in the first place.

<sup>37</sup> As Gilbert notes: "the importance to the subject of maintaining the coherence of their 'world', even in the face of events which seem wholly to disprove their earlier assumptions about it [offers] a compelling account of the sheer inertia which seems to have characterised public imaginative responses to [the 2008] crisis and to have inhibited the emergence of radical responses to it." (13)

<sup>38</sup> "Despite claims by President Obama and leading analysts about an historic comeback for American industry and a wave of "insourcing," the share of U.S. markets for advanced manufactured goods controlled by imports reached another all-time high in 2011. [...] The USBIC report shows that imports in 2011 captured 37.57 percent of the collective \$2.01 trillion American market for a group of more than 100 advanced manufactured products in 2011 – a new record level. The 2010 import penetration rate for the same group was 37.07 percent – 1.33 percent lower. Imports controlled 24.49 percent of substantially the same group of U.S. manufacturing markets in 1997, the year the government data needed to calculate these import penetration rates were first issued. Worse, advance indicators – principally another increase in U.S. imports in these industries – are signaling that import penetration rates rose significantly again in 2012." (Tonelson)

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Freedman ("Marxism, Cinema" 80) He calls the American 50's "the decade that constitutes the privileged image of social harmony for reactionary American ideology since the late 1960's."

<sup>40</sup> The suit itself is a barrier as well as a tool, taking Michel Serres' description of a barrier (from his recent text, *Malfeasance*, on property and pollution), with an 'inside' that "protects the inhabitants" and an exterior that "threatens invaders with its hardness" (43).

<sup>41</sup> The need to accept such wild variety as 'normal' reflects also the primary ethical demand of flourishing discussions on identity politics, though there is the threat that factionalism and individualism are reaching such proportions that they merely reflect the 'individualistic' message of neoliberalism—hence again the ambiguity of overdetermined Killian.

<sup>42</sup> This failing of previously slick technology, culminating in the reinstatement of a technologically superior status quo has of late become a growing feature of the larger Hollywood action franchises—for example, *Die Hard 4* (2007), *Mission Impossible 4* (2011)—which bolsters its interest as a cultural tendency, though it is often hard to differentiate whether the ailing tech is a symptom of a larger cultural malaise or the bronchial wheeze of a franchise reanimated well past its prime. Perhaps both.

<sup>43</sup> The significance of Stark's relationship with Potts in the film is dealt with further and in more detail towards the end of this chapter, in the section titled 'A Different Value'.

<sup>44</sup> It seems very relevant also that the Mandarin is the enemy, condensing finance capital and competitive productive capital into one overdetermined symbol—"China is known for its industrial might. Manufacturers, miners, utilities and builders accounted for over 45% of China's GDP in 2012. In America, by contrast, they contributed less than 20%. China, according to caricature, makes *things*—things you can drop on your foot. Soft-toed America merely designs, brands and peddles them." (S.C. "The Post-industrial")

<sup>45</sup> This is a standard concept in anthropology since at least Mauss (*The Gift*). See also Graeber (*Toward*).

<sup>46</sup> For more on the traditionally overlooked role of essential female domestic labour (or at least unseen, uncelebrated labour) in the production of value, which is then more-or-less dramatically realised in the public arena by men, see Graeber (*Toward*), esp. 49-89.

<sup>47</sup> But this is not to be overly critical—gifts are notoriously ambiguous and complex things, and at least it wasn't a giant toy rabbit.

<sup>48</sup> In the following discussion, I quote from the more recent 2012 translation of *Roadside Picnic* unless otherwise indicated by reference to the 1977 version (edition 2009). Where the previous version has been used, it is not because the meaning of the translation is substantially different, but that the precise nuances of the word-choice make the point under discussion more clearly, and are typically also closer to the original Russian.

<sup>49</sup> This opens up a real can of worms as to truthfulness or even the usefulness of definitions of 'realism', 'fantasy', and so on. This is an enormous debate however, with a vast body of scholarship. For now, it is enough for this argument to note that under certain political circumstances, such as clear censorship or an overwhelming ideological consensus, an ostensible 'realism' is clearly more fantastical than the subversive efforts of 'fantasy'.

<sup>50</sup> Such as *Noon: 22<sup>nd</sup> Century*, originally published in Russian in 1962.

<sup>51</sup> For examples of Soviet SF from the period, and their relation to the political context, see Simon.

<sup>52</sup> As demonstrated admirably by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. ("Toward the Last") and Elana Gomel ("The Poetics") respectively.

<sup>53</sup> The possible racism aside.

<sup>54</sup> See Carlo Ginzburg's 'Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm' for a condensed history of this alternative mode of enquiry that focuses on the exceptional and non-obvious as privileged access-points to the whole.

<sup>55</sup> This is not to underestimate neoliberalism's flexibility, nor its ability to swiftly colonise new 'zones'. Post-Soviet Russia itself is a perfect example, as is the increasingly neoliberal China. Rather, it is to suggest that positing a fundamentally unstable ontology has the effect of demanding a critical and skeptical attitude to any and all purity discourses, including neoliberalism's, and goes some way towards representing the dominant social order as socio-historically contingent and produced, rather than essential or universal. It is to allow the representation of cracks from within, rather than a challenge from without, which is what is required in our globalised present.

<sup>56</sup> See Turner (*The Forest; The Ritual*); Benjamin ("Critique").

<sup>57</sup> Not, at this stage, incorporating a labour theory of value.

<sup>58</sup> Graeber (*Toward* 1-2)

<sup>59</sup> The room for agency, for change, of course lies in the gap between action represented by the value-token and actual action taken to achieve it, the dislocation of which would gradually push the pattern of action of society in one direction or another. This is not the place to go into this, but my favorite example is the 'shock' discovery that secondary school teachers and pupils have developed the habit of respectively teaching and learning 'to the exam', rather than being 'educated properly'. Under the circumstances, this is a perfectly rational thing to do. But my point is that a value-token meant to represent and elicit a particular type of action, a particular type of person and, ultimately, a particular pattern of social relations, is found to be encouraging something completely different.

<sup>60</sup> Lear comments that, where they once 'made food in order to feed the warriors who would plant their coup sticks', a small act reproducing an entire social organisation, later they simply made food. This wrapping of small actions in larger significance can be found everywhere—whenever a son, for example, is told not just to 'eat up' but to 'eat up so you can grow to be big and strong like your dad.' Contained in this simple statement is a very particular nexus of social relations and values.

<sup>61</sup> It may be significant, though difficult to establish a direct connection, that *Roadside Picnic* originally appeared in 1971, and so would presumably have been written during the period following the (eventually stalled) implementation of the so-called Liberman reforms in 1965, which "advocated greater freedom for individual enterprises from outside controls and sought to turn the enterprises' economic objectives toward making a profit." (Curtis 1996 ['The Brezhnev Era'], n.p.). Alternatively, during this time the Soviet Union was increasingly forced to rely on imports from capitalist countries, particularly agricultural imports from the US. As I will discuss later in the chapter, while it is a useful and obvious reading of the Zone to view it as a figure for the incursion of capitalist processes, it nonetheless should not be reduced to that exclusively.

<sup>62</sup> Note the (rather obvious) link between 'crap' and impurity.

<sup>63</sup> Some commentators (see for example, Andre-Driussi) have drawn the obvious comparison between Harmont, halved by the Zone, and a divided Berlin, where exotic and seductive commodities would cross the border on the black market, and the ostensibly decadent morality of the West was an unsettling and corrupting influence, which aligns with the points made in ft. 57. I want to retreat from simply aligning one with the other, since such a reading demands an overly rigid approach that ignores the text's subtleties; however, the connotations of a decadent capital and commodity culture, and the way these were brought into claustrophobic proximity to the Soviet bloc by the division of Berlin, are very appropriate touchstones in grasping the underlying conditions that gave rise to the specific form and significations of *Roadside Picnic*.

<sup>64</sup> The new translation, has this as "antique shop", but I have here substituted the 1977 translation's "junk shop", which is closer to the literal original Russian 'лавку старьевщика' and, I think, better captures the dislocating flavor of the passage—"antique" suggesting a continuity of cultural value that is properly absent in 'junk'.

<sup>65</sup> Again, notice the clear discourse of impurity in which the products of the Zone are described.

<sup>66</sup> In terms of money, the ultimate commodity, as Marx noted, there's no such thing as dirty money—history simply slides off it. (Red himself notes later, "Money doesn't stink. I've finally really understood that" [152], though what he does later suggests he doesn't really believe this).

<sup>67</sup> In the symbolic field of this novel, one would expect a source of desire to be framed as female (Guta, Dina), and indeed Red describes the Zone variously as "damned hag", "lifeblood", "traitorous bitch" (33) "evil bitch" and "murderess" (43), terms appropriate enough for a signifier of such alien and monstrous desire.

<sup>68</sup> On the point of rupturing the continuity of tradition, it is incidentally interesting that neither Dina nor Archie Burbridge look anything like their parents (188).

<sup>69</sup> Compare with: "what a head she has, what a neck—like a spirited young filly, proud but already loyal to her master" (54). Notice also the stress on how Guta is *publically* valued (ogled) by other men.

<sup>70</sup> Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. notes that "Arguably, of all sf cultures the Russian has held on to traditional domestic ideals most firmly, resisting brutal pressures of modernizing displacement longer than others." He briefly cites *Roadside Picnic* as evidence of this, placing Guta as "the Wife at Home [...] the only source of unchanging value" and describing her as "ethically energizing" (*Seven Beauties* 256)

<sup>71</sup> Compare also: “As usual, everything in here was tidy, everything sparkled, and there was steam rising from the pots.” (145)

<sup>72</sup> See, on the connection between market relations, slavery and circumventing of the moral duty of care, and the contrasting duty of care implied by even the most hierarchical social formations, David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*.

<sup>73</sup> Compare “I’ve always wanted to be my own boss, my own man, so that I don’t have to give a damn about anyone else, about their gloom and boredom...” (192) and “Now I get really depressed. I’ll have to count every cent again: This I can afford, this I can’t. I’ll have to pinch pennies for Guta’s gifts... No more bars, only cheap movies... And everything’s gray, all gray.” (47)

<sup>74</sup> “Moral hazard is the economist’s term for a rule that encourages people to behave badly. For example, a rule that says that you’re not liable for your factory’s pollution if you don’t know about it encourages factory owners to totally ignore their effluent pipes – it turns willful ignorance into a profitable strategy.” (Doctorow)

<sup>75</sup> One of the most curious fragments of the text is a moment completely tangential to the plot, where Red registers real disdain for a large group of protesters—‘long-haired idiot men and short-haired idiot women, waving stupid signs’ (100), dirty hippies and so on. But it resolves into a symptom of Red’s repression of his real feelings towards the society under this reading. They appear to Red as pointless and filthy, just as long as he is able to ignore the reality of the situation he both suffers under and yet supports through his stubborn adherence to a limited, individual freedom. But at the end, after his realisation that he has been ‘led around by the nose’ all this time, I understand his cry against the system as finding common cause with the disaffected protestors, his earlier perspective conditioned by the stance that politics is ‘pointless’. See also his early disparaging description of Europe, with all its “strikes”, “demonstrations” and “never-ending politics” (43).

<sup>76</sup> In this chapter, the Kefahuchi Tract trilogy will be referred to as the KT trilogy, and page references to the individual texts will be prefixed as follows: *Light* (L); *Nova Swing* (N); *Empty Space* (E).

<sup>77</sup> Harrison also finds time to puncture David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’ when firemen turn up in an ancient fire engine found in a field in France by some wealthy Samaritan, and lovingly restored as a big society contribution (E290).

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Moody.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, the key short story for this theme in Harrison’s work, ‘Suicide Coast’ (in Harrison, *Things that Never Happen*). Also see the description of Serai Mau’s tank at (L306), quoted later in this chapter.

<sup>80</sup> The surname of the main travel agent is Serotonin—a chemical associated with feelings of well-being and happiness, but particularly in popular discourse with the effects of drugs such as ecstasy, suggesting again a ‘false’ satisfaction.

<sup>81</sup> See Harrison (*Things* 73; 274-5)

<sup>82</sup> See Jameson (*Postmodernism*), Chapter 1, Section 5.

<sup>83</sup> This trickery continues particularly with regards to Aschemann, an apparently key protagonist to the second novel, *Nova Swing*, but who may or may not be the same person in each scene, due to his choice of the ‘Einstein’ package.

<sup>84</sup> It should be noted at this point that the power of many of Harrison’s works come from their conscious *lack* of something—like solidarity, like satisfaction of desire—in order to highlight the reality of a world with such a lack, and to force the reader to confront it. In this case however, the critique I make is of a pernicious *presence* in the text that is, I argue, presented as the genuinely positive option.

<sup>85</sup> All the more pertinent as Harrison has a history of scathing reviews when it come to McCaffrey’s ‘candyfloss’ sf, see Harrison (*Parietal Games*).

<sup>86</sup> Of course, Harrison is consummate in titillating the reader’s desire for them simultaneous with undercutting that desire—the reader is complicit and forced to rethink their own attitudes, rather than being given a safe and privileged distance from which to feel superior to those ‘others’, those naïve fans of sf, at which the book takes aim.

<sup>87</sup> See for comparison Harrison discussing the “emotional abstractions” of heroic fantasy: he states, “if you haven’t the foundation of a palpable battle, an affair of torn arteries and maimed horses, then your heroisms are void, your battle-songs hollow” (Harrison, *Parietal Games* 90-1).

<sup>88</sup> Saudade is not directly translatable, and means something more than nostalgia (it is similar to the Welsh word *hiraeth*. Roughly it means a somewhat melancholic feeling of incompleteness. It is related to thinking back on situations of privation due to the absence of someone or something, to move away from a place or thing, or to the absence of a set of particular and desirable experiences and pleasures once lived. It is a desire for presence instead of absence. It has been described as ‘the love that remains’ after someone or something has gone, which carries a repressed knowledge that the longed-for thing will never return. It brings sad and happy feelings all together, sadness for missing the thing and happiness for having experienced the feeling.

<sup>89</sup> It is a nice detail that Ed’s memories of the past valorise Liv and denigrate himself, while Liv’s (at least initially) do the reverse.

<sup>90</sup> See *Solaris* and *His Master’s Voice* in particular.



<sup>91</sup> See also “the impeccably Marxist-Blochian principle that home [...] can never be merely recovered but must be attained through the revolutionary work of social transformation that, as Marx suggests, necessarily begins in the human intellect and imagination.” (Freedman, “Marxism, Cinema” 81).

<sup>92</sup> Compare “some cheap cutter’s idea of the future” (E50)

<sup>93</sup> Though the Aleph certainly represents an aporetic moment of the trilogy that resists closure, there is, I believe a reading that makes sense of it, but, since it is one that is not pertinent to the main argument, I’ll just briefly summarise here. Harrison has expressed a desire to move away from genre boundaries and have a ‘melting pot’ of literature (Cramer). The KT trilogy could be read as both an attempt at, and a story about, this melting pot; the superposition of Anna and Assistant in the Aleph at the close of the trilogy is a symbol of both the content and the form of the trilogy. One clue we are given is that, as Aleph, both Anna and Assistant re-evaluate and attempt to intervene in their own lives up to the point of their transcendence. Suddenly, scattered metaphors, signs and oddities throughout *Empty Space* are revealed to have been the fruit of these interventions. Anna, in particular, is “reduced to the use of theatre, metaphor, symbols and emotions” (E284)—the tools of literature—to try and communicate with her previous self. Realisation dawns on the reader that the Aleph has been present throughout this final book, has, in fact, constructed the book, and is itself the ‘meaning’ that draws together the messages inscribed into the weather, the flowers, the unreadable symbolisms. The Aleph is the text’s way of talking about its own composition, from a heady blend of sf and realist tropes and techniques.

<sup>94</sup> It’s difficult not to hear here an echo of the likes of Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin, lamenting the violence done in the name of idealistic ‘blue-print’ utopian programmes.

<sup>95</sup> Christopher Palmer claims Miéville brings into association the “grossly material and the uncannily immaterial” (226)

<sup>96</sup> See also “Even if it’s true that the different values [of the genres] fundamentally work against each other, the attempt to marry them may never succeed, but it might approach success asymptotically. Try again, fail again, fail better. That tension, that process of failing better and better—the very failure, if it’s the best kind of failure—might generate interesting effects that a more ‘successful’—ie aesthetically integrated—work cannot do.” (Miéville, “With One Bound”)

<sup>97</sup> There is still room for disagreement of course – Freedman (*Art & Idea*) disagrees with elements of both Vint (“Possible Fictions”) and Gordon (“Hybridity”), but a broad consensus remains.

<sup>98</sup> See Stanley Tambiah, quoted on page 10 of this work.

<sup>99</sup> The series runs for five books, published between 2006-2011. See Justina Robson, “Keeping”; and “Selling” for the first two.

<sup>100</sup> Colin Wilson’s *The Mind Parasites* is another example, where the author takes the ingredients of the Weird and eviscerates them. The assertion and victory of agency through sheer rationality and individual will-power, the individual man reinstated as centre of the universe rather than decentred, the effort to create a ‘rational’ cognitive effect for the ‘Weird’ creatures, all this takes what Miéville has called the “sublime backwash” (“Weird Fiction” 511) of the Weird, and spits it back out again.

<sup>101</sup> For the sake of argument, I would place the KT Trilogy closer to Slipstream than the New Weird.

<sup>102</sup> “Weird fiction may serve as the bad conscience of the Gernsback/Campbell sf paradigm, and as a rebuke to much theorizing that takes that paradigm’s implicit self-conception as its starting point” (Miéville “Weird Fiction” 510).

<sup>103</sup> Miéville’s first novel, *King Rat*, was published in 1998, a year prior to the Seattle protests.

<sup>104</sup> Of interest is the fact that the narrative voice of cyberpunk is commonly associated with that of the pared-down, cynical voice of detective fiction, lending these works, in spite of their apparent technological sublime, a deflationary aspect and a grim view of human motivations—perfect for the times (cf. Freedman, “Marxism, Cinema”)

<sup>105</sup> See Haldane.

<sup>106</sup> “The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe’s utmost rim.” (Lovecraft, “Supernatural Horror” 447)

<sup>107</sup> My favorite example of the representation of competing ontologies appears in M John Harrison’s “Storm of Wings” (*Viriconium*), where the encroachment of a species of alien insect onto a human planet causes the very nature of reality to become unstable, as they bring their own ontology with them, and it starts to undermine the human one—as if reality were *completely* a matter of what you believe it to be. In the Kefahuchi Tract trilogy Harrison deploys a similar idea, where it doesn’t matter what kind of universe is implied by the various scientific theories of the various races, since they all worked anyway, even though many flatly contradict each other.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Miéville (“Weird Fiction” 512): “a surrender to the *ineluctability of the Weird* [...] implying no irruption of strangeness into a status quo, but a Weird universe.”

<sup>109</sup> See Freedman (*Art & Idea*) and Vint (“Possible Fictions”) for the biggest disagreement, over the suggestiveness of ‘possibility mining’.

<sup>110</sup> This theme prevails throughout Miéville's work: in *The City & The City*, two cities are made from one location through the negative application of imagination for ideology's sustenance; in *Embassytown* the aliens must learn the power of metaphor 'the lie that truths' in order to break free of a dictatorship.

<sup>111</sup> See Freedman (*Art & Idea*)

<sup>112</sup> For a summary of the properties of joking relations, see Graeber, *Possibilities* 16-24.

<sup>113</sup> Of course, we already have an exemplary study of this—Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*—a quote from which forms the epigraph of a previous section.

<sup>114</sup> See also "The grotesque shakes the foundations of what claims to be ultimately valid, but does not replace it with another validity. Where the full stops were before, it puts so many question marks—it does not conclude or finish but opens new ways, starts you off". (István Örkény, qt. in Bán)

<sup>115</sup> It is interesting here to remember Suvin's essay on Brecht, "The Mirror and the Dynamo"—the parable form appears to be closer to bourgeois mirror than radical dynamo when the generic language of the parable becomes a reflection of quotidian reality.

<sup>116</sup> If we following Jameson (who follows Feuerbach's theory of religion), magic in fantasy is to be taken as a figure for the "enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualization of everything latent and virtual in the stunted human organism of the present" (*Archaeologies* 66). Magic is a representation of unalienated human productive power—the potential, capacity and freedom to shape the world around us. Jameson alleges that it is rendered facile in modern fantasy by the omission of the very material and historical constraints that are produced by the sedimentation and resistance of previously realised human productive powers—a lack of structure; an over-valorisation of agency. And it is precisely these historical constraints that sf registers so well (66), particularly in the shape of the sheer materiality of technology and the power that the products of past human labour—the built environment, social institutions, social contracts, the particular material qualities of specific objects—have over individual agency. The example of the golem demonstrates how Miéville manages to represent both agency and how it is shaped and resisted by socio-historical forces.

<sup>117</sup> I am talking, of course, about socially-constructed reality—empirical, material reality is itself shaped by fantasy, but indirectly, through fantasy's influence on the organisations and structures of social reality.

<sup>118</sup> See also Miéville: "a good part of the vigour of much fantastic fiction today is in its mediated response to that new politics" ("With One Bound")

<sup>119</sup> See also from the same section: "[t]he concept of the multitude forces us to enter a new world in which we can only understand ourselves as monsters" (194); and "[t]he new world of monsters is where humanity has to grasp its future" (196).

<sup>120</sup> It's worth noting here that inter-cultural /-species/-race/-class desire is prominently figured in Miéville's work, as part of the general thrust of his work towards a celebration of hybridity, diversity, engagement with the other, and so on. There are, to name a few: Isaac and Lin (*Perdido*); the human boy Shekel and the heavily Remade Angevine (*The Scar*); the homosexual Cutter and Susullil (*Iron Council*) Judah Low and Remade Uzman (*Iron Council*). These relationships are often some of the most powerful aspects of the texts, but this moment between Ann-Hari and Uzman is the most momentous of them, in the nature of its public display and calculated effects.

<sup>121</sup> Noting this ineffable difference from the perspective of someone who hadn't gone through the revolution is Miéville's way of acknowledging and partly circumventing the issue of the impossibility of imagining (without diminishing) life after the revolution.

<sup>122</sup> See Burling on the difficulties of representing art that properly reflects the social relations of a utopian society.

<sup>123</sup> See, for a fascinating comparison of the contrasting ontological ramifications of Thekla and a mall, Ben-Tov (173-4).

<sup>124</sup> This comment, and the next by Vint, originally refer to *The Scar* in particular, but I think they are applicable to Miéville's work more broadly.

<sup>125</sup> Although calling it the "aesthetic and symbolic" suggests a critical sophistication of a particular sort—philosophising is big business in the Railsea.

<sup>126</sup> Miéville is far from anti-theory or anti-intellectual. There is a two-fold consideration here. Firstly, the representation of 'philosophising' should be taken as the light-hearted teasing it is. More seriously, it does register a genuine concern, where 'theory' begins to be considered not a useful aid to thought to be used when appropriate, but as a truth to hold on to. The map is mistaken for the ground once again. As MP Renoko states in Harrison's *Empty Space* "'You agree there's no necessity to confuse a practical tool with a theory of the world?'" (35).

<sup>127</sup> This is an increasingly popular theme being given proper treatment in fantastic fiction. While more traditional narratives would have the children learning a moral lesson that would allow them to return 'grown up' and ready to find their place in the adult status quo, *Railsea* has precisely the opposite message, as does the award-winning 2012 novel *Dark Eden* by Chris Beckett. Both of these stories can be understood as narrating the birth (or resurgence) of rational, critical thought against a hegemonic traditional wisdom, with children as the protagonists, and it is the social order that finds it must accommodate them, rather than the other way around.

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. “the wide, superior vision that the person who is seeking to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in truer proportion.” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 272).

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